

# The Dawn of the Prometheans

by ilmiopassato

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Summary: COMPLETE. Sequel. In the ruins of an island on planet Khan, in the Outer Colonies, Major Natalie Cooper and her Marines make a life-altering discovery. A new enemy has emerged post-war alongside human rebels and the Storm - and now it is up to the UNSC to make sure the threat never hits Earth.

## 1. Intro: No Rest for the Wicked

Author's Note: Well, here, as promised, is the start of the fifth story in the Cooper series. A special welcome to readers old and new!

For those who are not familiar with my stories, here's some disclaimers before I start:

1) I DO NOT OWN Halo, the franchise/the books/the games/other media. I'm just writing a story based off this universe. And, like with the previous installments in the series, times/dates/settings may be slightly AU. This story in particular will be diverging liberally from main canon at times, but I promise it'll still be very recognizably Halo. ;)

2) Also like its predecessors, this story is rated T but tends to toe the line with M for language, violence, blood, gore, and some suggestive/sexual content (not graphic). You have been warned.

3) While it is not strictly necessary to read the other Cooper stories to understand this one, it is **\*\*highly\*\*** recommended. The fics in this series have built off one another and you'll miss a lot of the character development/story progression if you choose to start here. In particular with this fifth story, it begins immediately following the events of story four, "The New Age of Warfare". So at the very least, I recommend reading the last few chapters of that before you dive into this one. If you're not sure what order the stories go in, I have them numbered in chronological order on my profile page.

Other than that, enjoy! I really hope you like it, and please let me know what you think. :)

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Intro: No Rest for the<span> Wicked\*\*

WARNING! TOP SECRET! EYES ONLY!

SCANNING IN PROGRESSâ€|

â€|CLEARANCE GRANTED

/TO: Captain Daniel G. Rhodes, Commanding Officer UNSC Transport vessel \_Suave Affair\_, UNSC Navy

FROM: Rear Admiral Sarah Dartmouth, Commandant UNSC Concord Naval Air Base NA6, Pensacola, Florida, United States. North American Territory, UNSC Navy

SUBJECT: FILE ENCRYPTED

MESSAGE:

Captain Rhodes,

We have received your packet concerning updates on the ongoing mission on the surface of Khan. After careful review of the after-action reports from all the senior ground officers and pilots, as well as reports from yourself and your senior shipboard crew, HighCom has agreed to grant me permission to send you another friendly ship from our home fleet to the Outer Colonies as reinforcement. This includes a fresh complement of Navy crewmen and Marines, as well as additional supplies, vehicles, and ordnance.

As per usual, the voyage will take around three weeks to complete. As I'm writing this message following your mention of a gutsy ground assault against an unprecedented high number of Remnant forces, which I have no doubt is currently underway, I realize the reinforcements may not be there in time to help with present operations. However, as you mentioned that the ground command team has plans to go after the Storm on an island off the coast following this assault - should our Marines succeed in defeating the aliens on the mainland - the ship I'm sending out now should be able to reach you in time to aid in combat there.

I only hope the reinforcements don't arrive too late. Please keep me apprised of the situation, as the brass are very interested in seeing the outcome of events on Khan.

Take care.

Rear Admiral Sarah Dartmouth, Commandant UNSC NA6

/END MESSAGE/

## **\*\*Chapter One: Breaking Even\*\***

\*\*\*\*\*1604 Hours, February 9, 2558. Qamar Island Ruins,\*\*\*\*  
Planet Khan\*\*\*\*. "The First Tango," Outer Colonies. Prologue to the  
Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*\*\*\*

Just four months ago, I'd thought the Human-Covenant War was over. I'd thought that most of my days in actual combat were done. I'd spent much of the last four years before this living a peaceful life on Earth with my husband Willis and our three kids: seven-year-old Gabe, and four-year-old twins Liam and Olivia, all while helping Earth rebuild from the fighting and eventually becoming CO of the 8th Engineer Battalion. It was what I'd been hoping and longing for throughout all the six long years I'd fought the Covenant during the war: a well-deserved rest and uninterrupted time with my family.

But now, because of human rebels, the religious nutjob sect of the broken Covenant - called the Storm - and some new enemy we'd just discovered today and had yet to name, we were all back at it again.

Funny how the old saying proved true. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Stuck inside the underground ruins of Qamar Island now, in the Outer Colony world of Khan, I brought my gun up at the same time as the spook beside me, Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd, did. In our first glimpse inside the deep chamber of the ruins, we'd just heard a sound that didn't match anything we could account for within our own team. So of course, it had to mean trouble.

"Marines, watch those walls!" I shouted inside the cavernous room. "We don't know where our new mechanical buddies spawned from, or which of these portals could be functioning. Everyone tag a spot and be ready!"

Like I hadn't already had enough on my plate today, what with clearing out the Storm forces on the island once and for all, and the strange and entirely unexpected meet and greet with some sentient, aggressive AI things outside the ruins that we still didn't quite understand, the spook beside me had also informed me that the chamber we were now in contained a series of portals to other worlds. Which ones, nobody knew. How many of the portals were actually active anymore, nobody knew either. It was all stuff that naturally made me curious, as well as awestruck, and I'd already decided I was going to send a thorough report of our findings in this place to HighCom once we were back aboard our ship in orbit, the Suave Affair.

The only problem was, of course, how to get out now if the same enemies we'd faced up to were coming back around again. I figured that started with finding the source of the sudden noise that had just cropped up and eliminating it.

Weapons raised, my Marines and I visually scanned the walls of the circular chamber surrounding us for anything that might suddenly wink into existence from any part of the room. Although we continued to hear the sound, nothing had yet appeared. I turned to Lieutenant Lloyd then, wondering what the hell it could be.

"Cal? You probably know more about this than I do since I just found

out these things even existed. Should we have seen something pop up by now?"

"Yes, ma'am," the ONI operative replied, though he continued looking down the sights of his BR85HB nonetheless. "Still don't see anything, Major. Not even with the scanners on my HUD. But the sound hasn't gone away."

I suddenly remembered then that down here, we didn't have radio contact with the surface. Earlier I'd had to send one of my Marines back up himself to call for extra hands. My pulse quickened at the thought. "That only means one thing, Lieutenant. Whatever that noise is, it's not coming from down here. It's coming from up top."

Acting fast, I raced over to the old, crumbling stairs that, as far as I could tell, were our only route to and from the surface. I gestured to my team behind me while I began to run up two steps at a time. "Let's move it, Marines! Back to the top, now!"

If we hadn't all been fit UNSC servicemen and women at the peak of condition, the climb would've been long and arduous; the stairs were ancient, steep, and unforgiving. And there were lots of them. As it was I could feel my leg muscles burning and my lungs expanding and contracting fast by the time we made it to the summit, and my knee joints mildly ached. It wasn't from old age since I was only thirty, but from overuse. I'd been in the infantry throughout most of my nearly eleven-year career in the Marines, and all that physical battering I received on a fairly frequent basis in combat, along with all the constant hauling of gear and supplies on my person, were taking their toll.

Not that I complained, however. I sucked it up as I always did, and instead focused on finding out what the hell was happening when we finally stepped back out into the bright island sunlight.

I found, however, that I didn't even have to open my mouth to speak. The answer was staring me in the face the moment we came up.

Somehow, and from where I had no clue, the mechanical beings we'd fought at the entrance had reappeared in greater number on the surface while we'd been down below exploring the ruins. Earlier we'd fought maybe around half a dozen of them, no more than a handful and mostly just the flying drone versions. Now, it seemed there were more - a lot more. When I looked up, I saw that at least eight of them were the big tall ones that I thought looked vaguely like Elites at first, all surrounded by two drones each as they fought my Marines ahead of us. Besides those, I saw that a new kind had showed up, too - smaller ones that crawled along the ground as fast as roaches, but looked sort of like mechanical dogs.

Great, I thought to myself. Now we've got AI Fido in the mix, too.

Beside me, my aide, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter, brought his SAW to bear as he spoke to me. "Ma'am, I'd respectfully suggest you proceed with caution. Whatever perimeter we had set up before is clearly not holding up."

I snorted. "I can see that, Josh. But thanks." Turning behind me, I

saw my husband's much younger brother, Matthew Hawk, bring up his assault rifle as well, rearing to get into the skirmish. I held up my hand at him and he lowered his weapon with a questioning look.

"Wait a sec, kiddo," I said. "I need to find out what the hell happened before we just go rushing in."

Much as I was itching to jump into the fray myself, I knew it wouldn't be wise. Already in the few months we'd spent here on Khan, we'd lost not only the UNSC outpost we'd been sent to help bolster, but also its CO, Colonel Dwight. And in the subsequent fighting against the Storm on the mainland, we'd even lost my best friend and joint commander on this mission, Major Oliver Hayden. His death had occurred just scant weeks ago, so the loss was still at the forefront of my mind and still hurt like hell, but most of the time I managed to clamp down on my feelings and focus on the task at hand.

What that all meant presently, however, was that I was now the senior ranking officer on the ground. If something happened to me now, we'd be cooked, as all that was left down the chain of command were the two battalions' captains. Already one of them was in charge of what used to be Hayden's unit, and my own XO was doing much of the leg work for my own since I currently had my hands full trying to direct both, as well as the vehicles, armor, and air support we'd brought with us to the island.

So basically, I needed to make sure I didn't bite the dust anytime soon. And not just for my family's sake, but for my Marines as well.

Unconsciously, I let out a sigh. Long day didn't even begin to cover it. It was more like a long several weeks.

Opening a COM channel to my XO, who I knew was one of the Marines busily engaged in the fighting now, I said, "Harris, this is Major Cooper. Where the hell did more of those bastards come from?"

"No clue, Major!" Captain Shawn Harris responded promptly. He sounded out of breath. "I know you thought there was a chance they came from those ruins, ma'am, but there must've been more up top that we hadn't seen. These ones came out from behind the old buildings, not inside."

Fuck, I thought. To Harris, I replied, "How is that possible, Captain? I've got Kilo Squadron flying above you with eyes on. They didn't spot them? Didn't they warn you they were on approach?"

"Yes, ma'am, they did. Talon sent out the warning, but by the time the flyboys saw them come out of whatever damned hole they'd been hiding in, it was too late. They were already swarming our position. Fighting hard, too, Major. This won't be easy to get out of. These bastards are tougher to take out than the Covies and Storm ever were."

"Don't I know it," I murmured. Before we'd entered the ruins, just one of those tall robots had leapt clear over a whole squad of Marines to land in front of the 'Hog we'd brought with us, eliminating all three of the Marines inside within seconds. If this new enemy had been going for a grand initial meeting, I couldn't think of anything more spectacular than that. Or frightening. I knew

that despite all we'd brought with us to Qamar, we'd certainly have our hands full if more of these mechanical beings continued to show up.

"Was that all, ma'am?" Harris asked.

"Just one more thing, Shawn. Have you seen anymore enter the fight since it began?"

"That's a negative, Major. But they've been keeping me pretty busy as well, ma'am, so it's possible I may have missed a few. But I get the feeling that this may have been all that were left hiding out in the back. Don't know what might've caught their attention, though, to force them out."

"Got it. Standby for more orders soon, Captain. Cooper out."

Even as I cut the connection, I could think of two things that may have lured the rest of them out: the approach of the remainder of my engineer battalion, and the small team I'd chosen to take with me to explore inside the ruins. Either one of those things may have triggered the possible backlash - probably both.

I supposed though that the "why" didn't matter so much anymore. Now, we were just faced with the task of dealing with it.

Turning to face my aide, I said, "All right, Josh. Now's the time. Let's get in there and help."

I could hear the staff sergeant beginning to protest behind me, but I didn't stick around to hear what his objection was this time. And apparently neither did the Marines with us. Rather than await their squad leader they instead charged headlong into the fray with me, weapons up and ready to take on whatever came at us first.

Surprisingly, that didn't take long. I'd only taken a few steps towards the fight when one of the AI dog-looking things must've sensed us coming and broke off its attack toward the larger force of Marines up ahead. Just off to the left of it, a second dog-like machine did the same. Then, moving with amazingly quick speed, they ran right for us instead.

Already holding my DMR to bear in my hands, I took rapid aim at the first and fired, three straight bursts that I thought would nail the little bastard for sure. But their speed served them well, and just as I'd fired my last burst, it ducked under the volley of lead and ran at me fast, trailing sparks from the initial two bursts. Knowing I wouldn't get another good aim in in time, I backpedaled, reaching for my sidearm with my right hand as I held onto my DMR with my left. Even if I managed to get the magnum out of my hip holster now, I knew I wouldn't do it fast enough to avoid getting shot to bits by the robot dog.

Thankfully, that's when Porter sprinted up beside me and let out a long rattle of gunfire from his SAW. Sweeping from left to right on the ground with his rapid-fire weapon, he made quick work of both beasts in no time. Seconds later both mechanical things skidded to a halt in the grassy dirt, their brightly lit eyes going dark and sparks overwhelming their circuits where they'd been hit. It was

doggy heaven for the robotic mutts, and a big, heavy sigh of relief for me.

"Thanks," I said to him, realizing only now how hard I was breathing.

I kept thinking that after all the close scrapes I'd been through in my life, I'd somehow become accustomed to them by now and not worry so much about the near-death stuff. Instead, I found I felt more or less the same about it today as I had when I'd first been commissioned as an officer in the Marine Corps at twenty, almost eleven years ago. Death never sounded like a good idea.

And I'd had more than my fair share of close calls over the years. The only-just-healed bullet wounds in my left shoulder and chest were a testament to that, courtesy of some overzealous Jackal snipers that had been harassing Outpost Columbia for profit before it'd gone up in smoke. Good times.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" Porter asked me then in response to my gratitude. I waved him off.

"Fine, Staff. Come on, let's keep going. There's plenty more where that came from."

A quick glance up ahead proved that the sudden skirmish was anything but close to being over. We hadn't quite arrived at the start, and we weren't getting overwhelmed yet, but I had to admit that whatever those mechanical things were - wherever they'd come from - they were certainly putting up a good fight. It wasn't long before I heard my XO's voice over the COM channel again as he hailed me.

"Major! We're burning through bullets fast here! Where's our air support?"

"Can't call them in, Captain! The fighting's too condensed! If they target the enemy, they'd also be hitting us!" I answered.

"Shit! What about our Scorpion, ma'am?"

"Same thing! We're just going to have to tackle this on our own, Harris."

"Understood!"

Now that he'd brought it up, I refrained from setting my sights on a new target just long enough to hail Kilo and our armor, which should've been somewhere behind the engineers bringing up the rear. I didn't want them getting too excited to help, either, although I knew both Marine commanders were smart enough to stay out the fighting if it would hurt friendlies. Just in case, though, I opened up another channel to both.

"First Lieutenant Abel?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I want you and your Scorpion to sit tight for now and hold position where you're at. Do not fire at the enemy. I repeat, do not fire. Friendlies are amongst them."

"Got it, Major. Standing by."

"Good. Talon?"

My husband's voice flooded my helmet, full of concern. "What's up, Cooper? I see you guys have your hands full down there, but I don't want to launch anything in case it hits some of you. You're too tightly packed."

"I know," I said. "Just keep an eye out for anymore that might emerge, and be sure to give us a head's up if they do."

"Will do, Major." Then his voice went low. "I'm sorry about before, honey. We were reconning the area when you went in, just like you'd ordered, but we didn't see them in time."

"I understand. Harris filled me in. We'll handle it."

The connection cut fast as I didn't have time to stand there and chitchat. By now the melee was growing more and more chaotic around me. Sparks flew as metal parts and human blood occasionally sprayed into the air, all while bullets and what looked like pulses of orange laser light tore through their intended targets. Marines were dropping quickly, but then again so were most of the mechanical dogs and the drones. What ended up proving harder to go up against were the tall Elite-looking things. Until we better understood their weaknesses -and actually found out what the hell these things were - I was afraid I'd be looking at some very high casualty numbers by the end.

And that was something I'd just never been able to accept. As supreme ground commander, I was responsible for the well-being of all my Marines - and I wanted to make sure I could bring all I could back home safe. If something could be done to stop this, it was up to me to find it.

I opened up yet another general channel, going off a hunch I had after seeing what had occurred during my first encounter with these things at the entrance to the ruins. Maybe it would work, maybe it wouldn't, but it was time to see.

"Marines, keep up the fire! Target the dogs and the drones first! I repeat, take out those drones! Then pour all the lead you've got into those big tall bastards! Let's do this!"

The cacophony of battle only increased then as the Marines around me quickly switched up the pace to do as I ordered. I started to hear more and more metallic pops and bursts of hot metal as one by one, the dogs and drones were attacked relentlessly and sent into smoking heaps on the ground. Finally, the tide of the fight began to change.

But even as those things started getting destroyed at a faster rate, the big tall ones jumped into a higher gear, too, to compensate. Now, as I stood firing off bursts from my own weapon as well, trying to nail as many of the flying drones as I could, I watched out of the corner of my eye as the Elite-like ones didn't just leap from the fight. They started teleporting away.



Of course, there was no way I could know if that was exactly what they were doing. It was simply the only way I knew how to describe it.

One thing I did know, however, was that they'd only started doing that once most of the drones had been cleared out of the way. Again, I made the connection in my mind to the first fight, and began to see how the two possibly worked in tandem while in combat. I'd try to find out more from our spook Cal once the skirmish was over.

It was only as the last few rounds poured from my Marines' guns and I got a hail from my XO that I felt like things were finally calming down.

"Major, they've retreated! I don't know where they went - couldn't see 'em - but it looks like most are gone for now, ma'am."

"You mean most of the big ones," I corrected.

"Yes, ma'am. We've still got some of the dogs around as stragglers, but we'll get that mopped up. As you can see, the drones are all destroyed."

I nodded to myself, though I knew he couldn't see it. "Right. Excellent work, Harris. Please relay that to the Marines as well."

"On it, Major."

A few minutes later, the last sounds of the fight finally died out. When it was done I was left standing there in a bit of a shock, astonished at just how fast things had begun and then ended. Meanwhile, the effects of the brief skirmish between our forces were all around us: strewn weapons and smoking metal parts and Marine bodies and sparks were all over in small pockets of tragedy. And even through my helmet's filtered systems, I could smell it, too. The carnage against the human corpses, and the smoky smell of oil and burnt ozone from the enemy's broken components and weapons' discharge. The latter was something I'd gotten used to during the Human-Covenant War, and again when we'd fought the Storm here on Khan on the mainland, but this smelled a little different. In the moment, I wondered if these new beings fought with plasma as well, or something different. Another thing to ask Lieutenant Lloyd later.

For now, I knew I had to get the Marines organized again and let our other battalion waiting in the wings, the 904th Infantry, know of what had occurred here. I also had to get our medic to attend to the wounded, and pick out the dogtags of the dead once that was complete. I sighed as I looked over the great mess the skirmish had created at our feet, then paused for a few seconds before opening up a new channel.

It was in that moment that I received a hail from our ship in orbit, the Suave Affair.

"Affair to ground commander, please respond."

Curious, I answered right away. "Affair, this is Major Cooper. Go ahead."

"Cooper, this is Affair actual. Take a pilot and get back up to the ship now, Major. And bring the spook with you. We've had some new developments that you need to be brought up to speed on right away."

I frowned, wondering what that really meant. But I knew if the ship's captain had hailed me over it, it must be big. "Sir, we've just had a skirmish end right this moment - and with a brand-new enemy, no less. The area hasn't been secured yet. Before I head up, I'd like to -"

"Now, Major. Let your XO and other officers handle it."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I expect you up here in thirty minutes. Affair out."

The line went dead then, and I was left wondering what kind of news the Affair's CO had that involved me - or groundside operations. Rather than dwell on the unknown, however, I got straight to work making sure a new defensive perimeter was set up, that Cal was nearby, and that a pilot was ready to take us back up into space.

Again I felt a pang of regret when I realized that whatever the message was, it probably wasn't going to be pleasant. And almost assuredly, it meant that at least for the foreseeable future, we weren't going home.

### 3. Chapter 2: Sitrep

Author's Note: I'm taking some creative liberties with the Prometheans concerning the main Halo canon of the fourth game and attempting to line it up nicely with my own story here. I know timeline-wise I'm a little ahead of the events of Halo 4, but in this fic, I'm working under the premise that UNSC forces are still fighting on Requiem at the moment, and the Didact/Prometheans have not yet reached Earth. Thus, my own characters will find out some preliminary stuff about the Prometheans now, but they will not have the full scope of knowledge yet, like the fact that they're actually Forerunner AIs, and many were produced from humans. These are things they'll uncover slowly as the story progresses.

\* \* \*

#### ><p><span><strong>Chapter Two: Sitrep<strong>

Ten minutes later Lieutenant Lloyd and I were strapped into our seats in the troop bay of Willis's Pelican, on our way up to the Affair as ordered. I let out a tired sigh as soon as I sat down and pulled off my helmet, thankful that I was finally able to wipe the sweat from my forehead that I hadn't been able to earlier in the field. It'd been bothering me like crazy that I couldn't scratch the itch, although in combat there'd been plenty else to pay attention to that distracted me from my mild discomfort. The temperature on the island had been pretty balmy, much warmer than the mainland was, so I was sure everyone had been perspiring a lot today - rolling up my battledress jacket sleeves hadn't actually helped as much as I'd

hoped.

Now, though, I finally felt able to relax...just a little. I still wondered what we were getting summoned up to the ship for.

Placing my helmet in the seat beside me, I ran a hand through my brown hair then, trying to do what I could to keep busy so I didn't have to think about the fact that I was aboard a transport - or that I was getting sent back to the boat. Saying that ships of any kind weren't my thing was an understatement. There was a reason I'd joined the Marines over the Navy all those years ago, and that was because I loved having my boots on solid ground. Being stuck inside a metal box, unable to do anything in case we were attacked, scared me a lot more than the possibility of getting blown up or shot. At least on the battlefield, I knew I had some experience and a great deal of tricks up my sleeve to try to get myself out alive. Here, I had absolutely nothing. I wasn't too jazzed about those odds.

Although the only other occupant inside the troop bay was the spook, I still tried my best not to make any obvious gestures of nervousness. To keep my hands busy - and also because I was genuinely thirsty after the fight - I pulled my canteen from my web belt and took a generous swig. It was as I was screwing the cap back on that I glanced over at Lloyd, sitting across from me, and noticed his expression. For some reason he had worry written all over his face, his battle rifle lying sideways against his lap. He'd taken off his own helmet too by now, and I saw that he had his head in his hands, fingers brushing over his close-cropped, dark brown hair.

I nudged the suddenly sullen ONI operative with my boot and asked quietly, "Hey. What's with the face?" I grinned briefly. "Starting to hate being on ships as much as I do?"

Lieutenant Lloyd shook his head and released a sigh, still not looking up. "No, ma'am. It's not that. I'm just...worried about why we were called up."

"So am I to an extent, but I know that whatever it is, we'll deal with it. You, on the other hand, look like someone just punched you in the stomach."

Lloyd snorted. "I guess that's the difference between you and me then, Major." He finally lifted his gaze and his blue eyes met my green ones. "I'm afraid this meeting's about my older sister. I hope nothing happened to her."

"Is she deployed right now?"

"Yeah. I mean, yes, ma'am. She's leading her ODST battalion in another campaign here in the Outer Colonies. I usually get letchips from her about once every couple weeks, but now it's almost been a month and I haven't heard anything. I hope..." He swallowed. "I just hope she's okay."

I thought of the spook's only sibling and prayed she was fine, too. Lieutenant Lloyd, only three years my junior, had also been through a lot in his lifetime so far. We'd had several talks together after my best friend had been killed in the mainland fighting, and I found that Cal had had a much rougher past than I would've guessed given his normally pleasant disposition. I supposed sooner or later, it all

took a toll on us.

"I'm sure she's fine, Lieutenant," I said. The words felt hollow to me, though I didn't mean them to. I'd lost my own older sister in combat almost eight years ago. I couldn't say the wound was fresh anymore, but it was certainly something I'd never forget. "If this whole thing was just to tell you about your sister, they wouldn't have called me up, too."

The Navy lieutenant nodded at my words. "You're right, ma'am. I'm probably overreacting. But...after our mom was killed getting us off Derranjak as kids, it was just me and my dad and my sister left. Since my mom died only a few months after I was born, they're all the family I've ever known. We're a real close bunch. If something happened to Dad or Grace..."

"I know the feeling," I replied softly. "I worried about my oldest son every day during the war. I kept being afraid that Earth was going to get attacked while I was gone on a mission, and lo and behold, it was. Thankfully my husband was there to rescue him." I had to swallow down the bad memory to continue. "I still worry about all my kids now. I hate every second I'm away from them, and I hate thinking that something might happen to them on Mars, for whatever reason, while I'm away. But we can't live our lives constantly wringing our hands waiting for the shit to hit, Cal. Just trust me. I wouldn't have been ordered up if this had been about delivering some personal news to you. I'm sure this is just about the mission. So don't sweat it."

That finally seemed to get through to him. "Right, Major." He sighed again. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't mean to lose composure."

"It's okay. I know how much your family means to you after what you went through as an infant."

"Heh. Not that I remember that, of course, but it's...knowing that it happened that bugs me."

My husband's voice came over the intercom then, interrupting our conversation.

"Cooper, we're three minutes out. Might want to collect your gear and get ready to disembark."

Shifting over to the side, I hit the troop bay intercom in return to reply. "Got it, Will. Thanks."

Lloyd and I didn't exchange anymore words after that, probably in private preparation for whatever we were about to be told. Instead, we each picked up our respective rifles and helmets, scooted ourselves closer to the back hatch, and waited to land inside the \_Affair\_.

\* \* \*

><p>The moment we stepped out of the Pelican in the hangar bay, a young female ensign approached us.<p>

"Ma'am, sir, Captain Rhodes would like to see you right away," she said. "Please come with me."

At the same time, Willis rounded the corner, just now pulling off his helmet and unzipping the top portion of his flightsuit down to his chest, exposing part of his T-shirt underneath. The sharp-eyed ensign spotted him as well and added, "You, too, sir."

My husband and I exchanged a quick glance as he ran a hand through his short, light brown hair, but I shrugged. I didn't know anymore about what was going on than he did. Instead, we followed Lloyd and the ensign to the captain's personal briefing room several decks above. It only took a few more minutes to get there via the elevators.

Once there, the ensign ushered us inside, then saw herself out and closed the hatch behind her. Being the ranking officer, I stepped up first, stood at crisp attention, and saluted. Behind me, Willis and the spook did the same.

"Sir, Major Natalie Cooper, Captain William Hawk, and Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd reporting as ordered," I said.

The Navy captain, a man who looked to be in his mid-fifties with short graying hair, nodded in acknowledgment and waved a hand at us. "At ease, officers," he replied.

The three of us instantly relaxed our postures.

Standing firm before us, the ship's CO folded his arms across his chest. "We have a lot of important ground to cover in here today, but I want to try to keep this meeting short and informal. I know you all have a lot of work to do and plenty to get back to on the planet's surface. But before you return to your duties, there's some things I'd like to get out of the way."

"Sir?" I asked.

Surprising me, he gestured to Willis first.

"Captain Hawk, would you step forward please?"

"Uh, yes, sir, of course."

My husband moved a few paces ahead of Lloyd and I and came to attention again. For the first time, Captain Rhodes's face broke into a smile.

"At the request of your CO, Major Collins, we'd like to formally acknowledge all the work you've done so far on the surface of Khan, son," the captain said. "Congratulations, \_Major\_ Hawk."

A grin immediately came across my face as well, although it appeared Willis was simply dumbstruck. If we hadn't been in the presence of others - especially such a high-ranking superior officer - I would've gone over to give him a big hug and a hard kiss. I knew my husband had been waiting patiently for his own promotion to major since Remembrance Day of last year. I felt happy for him knowing that he'd finally made it.

The circumstances being what they were, though, I was forced to simply stand behind him and beam in support.

Finally, Willis found his voice. "Thank you, sir. So much. This is...wow. I wasn't expecting this."

Captain Rhodes clapped him on the shoulder as he handed him his new insignia - a single gold oak leaf. "Don't thank me, Marine. Go thank Collins. She's the one who put in the paperwork."

Willis chuckled. "Right. I'll go find her and thank her myself once the briefing's complete, sir."

"Actually, the rest of the meeting will just be between myself, Major Cooper, and Lieutenant Lloyd, Hawk. But I should warn you now that that new rank of yours comes with a larger responsibility as well."

"Sir?"

"Collins wants you to take charge of both Victor and Kilo Squadrons as you support the ground team, Major. Think you can handle it?"

"Yes, sir," Willis answered emphatically.

"Good. Then you're dismissed, son."

"Sir!"

My husband saluted, then spun on his heel and filed out. I wanted to tell him I'd meet up with him later in our shared quarters aboard ship, but I figured he already knew that. Besides, there was still the matter of the briefing to attend to for Lloyd and I.

The \_Suave Affair\_'s captain was still smiling slightly to himself when he addressed me. "You must be happy for your husband, Major."

"Very, sir. Thank you." Since we'd been ordered at ease, I raised my hand to my head and scratched it. "If I may ask, though, sir, how did you know I'd pick him when you told me to bring up a pilot?"

"It was the obvious choice. I knew you'd ask Hawk to shuttle you up, so there was no need to order you to bring him directly."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Good. Now, we've got some other important matters to discuss. I want this just between you and the spook for now, which is why I explicitly sent for the two of you. Major, you need to know because you're supreme commander on the ground, and Lloyd was requested because he could actually help us with comprehending a few things due to his ONI status." He looked to the spook then. "Lloyd, would you like to fill the major in?"

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Lloyd responded. He glanced over at me. "Just before we went inside the ruins, ma'am, I uploaded an image of the gun we found on the ground in front of the entrance, dropped by one of those big tall machine things as it disappeared. I also took the copy of your helmet cam feed that you sent me and uploaded that to the \_Affair\_ as well. I hoped that while we were down there fighting,

that might give the crew up here more time to find out what we were up against."

"And?" I asked.

"I sent a message to HighCom once I saw what we were dealing with," Captain Rhodes said. "Rear Admiral Dartmouth responded, and authorized me to open up the intel to you two as well." He looked at both of us in turn. "What we're facing now is brand-new enemy, something the UNSC has fought only once before, and very far from UNSC-controlled space. It's alarming that we've discovered a pocket of them here now, too."

"What are they, sir?" Lloyd questioned.

"ONI calls them 'Prometheans', Lieutenant. All we know about them so far is that they're not organic beings in nature, but more like machines. I suppose the best way to describe them is that they're digital entities in robotic form."

"So they are AIs," I murmured.

"That is correct, Major, but they're not of our making - and not like the AIs we know. They're not old Covenant tech, either, nor were they created by the Storm."

"Do they have anything to do with the Flood, sir?" I wondered.

"We don't know that much yet, Cooper. We still have UNSC forces on the surface of the world where these beings were first encountered a short time ago, and they're looking into trying to find out the answers to these and other questions as well. Namely, who created these creatures, and from where they originate."

"No one knows yet, huh?"

"That's sadly affirmative, Major."

I let out a sigh. This was a lot to take in. "I fought the Flood on Earth, sir, during the last months of the war. The only thing I can say about that is that it was absolutely terrifying. I really hope this has nothing to do with them."

"As do I."

I looked over at Cal then, but he didn't seem to have anything to add. "Anything else I should know about, sir?"

"Yes," Rhodes answered. "We've also gotten some initial intel on the various forms these AIs take. I noticed in your helmet feed that you encountered two of them on the surface. So far, we know of three types total."

"I think we fought the third just now, sir," I said. "Smaller four-legged ones. Looked like mechanical dogs to me."

"That's the one, Major. ONI has classified them as 'Crawlers'."

I snorted at that. "Aptly named, Captain."

"Indeed. The other two you fought, the drones and the taller, bipedal ones, are termed 'Watchers' and 'Knights', respectively."

Nodding, I paused a moment to let the new information sink in. It was nice to finally know what we were up against...sort of. At least we had names and classifications now. I was sure more detailed info on their weaponry and origins would be forthcoming, too.

"All right. Now we know what these things are at least," I said. "So where do we go from here, sir? What does HighCom want from us?"

"That's where things get tricky, Major," Captain Rhodes replied. "Enlisting the help of Lieutenant Lloyd here, Admiral Dartmouth has given me express orders to relay to you to carry out. Now that we know what they are and that they're there, we need to keep those ruins from falling into the Remnant's claws again should they reappear. We also need to find a way to discover where the Prometheans are coming from out of those portals, and to destroy them if necessary to prevent additional enemies from emerging."

"Tall order, sir."

"Yes, it is, Cooper. But I can't think of any other unit more suited for the job. And you'll be getting more help soon, too."

"Sir?"

"The admiral sent me another message just today. We've got another UNSC ship coming in to support."

I furrowed my brow. "How did they know we'd need the extra hands? We've only just encountered these...Promethean things today."

"Admiral Dartmouth dispatched them after she received the initial reports you and Major Hayden composed of the fighting on mainland Khan. This was when you'd first began your assault on the human rebel forces' HQ, only to have a very large number of Storm troops intervene. It was then that the admiral decided to procure us some reinforcements."

"And they're here now, sir?"

"No. But they should be arriving within the next few days. They'll be placed on standby in orbit, and will come down planetside only at your request. You're still at the helm of this operation, Cooper."

"All right."

Captain Rhodes turned to face Lloyd then. "Lieutenant, in this case, I don't think I need to spell out your own orders for you. Essentially, we need to gather all the intel we can on this new enemy, and also anything you can garner from the ruins themselves. A team of the UNSC's best civilian scientists are aboard the reinforcement ship as well. Make good use of them."

"Yes, sir," the spook replied.



"Excellent. You're dismissed now, Lieutenant."

"Sir!"

Lieutenant Lloyd repeated the motions my husband had and exited the room. That left just Rhodes and I inside.

"Before you go, Major, I had an additional item or two to discuss with you in private."

"Sir?"

"Firstly, I know that things groundside have gone belly up a few times since we've arrived. I know about the loss of Colonel Dwight and Major Hayden, which has now left you in sole command of the two Marine battalions left." He gave me a pointed look. "I also know what kind of heavy burden that must be for you. And I've got to say, based on how you were able to defeat the Storm so quickly on the mainland, then plan and execute the assault on the island today to eliminate the ex-Covies left, you've handled it all remarkably well."

"Thank you, sir."

"To that end, I'm proposing a couple of promotions for your men. With your permission, I'd like to give Captain Warfield, currently in charge of the 904th Infantry Battalion, the rank of major, and I'd like to give your XO, Captain Shawn Harris, the same. That way, both can officially head the battalions they now de facto command."

"I think that's a great idea, sir. Both are deserving of it, and it would definitely fill our command vacuum." Though I refrained from mentioning aloud what that meant for me if my battalion command was getting taken away and handed over completely to Harris. Was I being pushed out?

The Navy captain's expression, however, assured me otherwise. His slight smile returned as he pulled a small box from his inside jacket pocket. "I believe that leaves just you to figure out, Cooper. I've gotten the go-ahead from Rear Admiral Dartmouth, and we think you're owed something for your own performance here on Khan as well." He opened up the box, and inside was a single silver oak leaf. "Congratulations, Lieutenant Colonel. Now your job description of supreme ground commander fits the rank."

I stared dumbstruck at the box in much the same fashion as Willis had earlier. I'd only just made major a little over a year ago. And now, already I was looking at yet another notch up. A lump formed in my throat as I thought of Hayden - and how if he'd been alive, I'd hoped to see him get his soon. Instead, because he was gone, it was me.

"Wow. Thank you, sir. I..." I laughed a little nervously. "I can't think of anything to say that my husband didn't say himself just now. This is..."

Captain Rhodes patted me on the shoulder as well. "You deserve this for your expert handling of the Marines planetside, Cooper. Take it. I know you'll do fine."

I did as commanded and took the box in my hands. Slowly, and with steady hands, I pulled off my major's rank insignia from my battledress uniform and replaced it with my new one. The silver oak leaf of a lieutenant colonel. It still felt surreal.

"Again, sir. Thank you for this."

The captain chuckled himself then. "Like I told Hawk, don't thank me for it. The rank comes with its own costs, as I'm sure you well know by now."

I nodded.

"And Colonel Cooper?"

"Sir?"

His smile tightened. "Welcome to the hard part."

#### 4. Chapter 3: Stolen Moments

##### **\*\*Chapter Three: Stolen Moments\*\***

I left the briefing room feeling somehow more exhausted than elated. The concerns I had about the threat of a new enemy far outweighed the positives gained from Willis's and my promotions. With each of us getting another rank up, it meant a lot more pay would be making its way to our kids back on Mars, which was good - but I also knew it meant for sure now that we were here to stay, and that any hope that this deployment would end sooner rather than later had just died.

It'd been four months since we'd left Gabriel, Liam, and Olivia behind on our homeplanet with Willis's parents. I'd ached every day to see them. Now, it seemed like we'd be waiting even longer for a reunion. The thought left me sad.

Walking through the corridors of the ship to get to my quarters, I passed by a number of Marines and sailors who took one look at my rank and promptly saluted. Not having been used to it on the ground for the past several weeks, where such displays were forbidden for obvious reasons, I was slow to return the gesture. I felt achy and sluggish from the fight - my recent gunshot wounds in particular were sore and hurting. So before I proceeded to my room, I stopped by the mess for a quick pick-me-up.

Going to the drink dispensers first, I grabbed two cups of hot coffee, holding them together in one hand by the rim, then stashed away two energy bars in my pockets. I knew we'd have to return to the surface shortly, just as soon as I was done getting a few things ready for my higher-ups to read, so we didn't have time for a real meal. Although I was hungry and would've certainly preferred that to a few quick bites of a bar. But I reminded myself that beggars couldn't be choosers.

By the time I reached Willis's and my quarters, I was about ready to slump into the small chair by the equally tiny desk in the room. Before I could do that, though, I had to get past the automated AI voice-match system, since we were berthed in the senior officers

area.

"Please state your name and rank for entry," the low-grade AI said as I approached.

I answered without a second thought, having done this routine countless times during our voyage to Khan. "Major Cooper, Natalie McKenzie. Service number 38221-50486-NC."

A harsh tone sounded and a red light went on. "Access denied."

Frowning, I racked my brain for a moment before I remembered. "Oh. \_Lieutenant Colonel\_ Cooper, Natalie McKenzie. Service number 38221-50486-NC."

"Access granted."

The hatch was unlocked then and I was able to pull it aside and go in. Willis had his back to me when I entered, going through his gear for something by the minuscule closet. Thinking nothing of it, I set the two drinks and bars down on the desk, then quickly undid the buttons of my battledress jacket and shrugged it off, along with my armor, weapon, and helmet. After that, feeling considerably lighter without all the added weight on my person, I pulled out the bottom of my T-shirt from under my belt. I finally took another step forward then and pretty much flopped down into the hard chair in the room, propped my head up on the desk with one hand, and let out a sigh.

In front of me, I heard Willis chuckle. "Rough day?"

I snorted. "I wish that were descriptive enough to even \_begin\_ to cover it."

"It's not so bad," my husband replied, finally turning to face me. "Look. I've got a shiny new insignia."

A smile made its way to my face. "I noticed. Congratulations, honey."

"Thanks." He stepped a little closer. "So now that we're both the same rank..."

"Yeah, about that - "

"What?"

Willis was staring at me with an inquisitive look on his face now. I didn't want to steal his moment, but I knew he wouldn't let it go until he knew. So I grabbed my jacket from the back of the chair I was in and flipped over the collar so he could see. His eyes went wide.

"Jesus. You made LTC?"

"Yup. I don't know if that's tragic or if I should actually be happy about it. This...wasn't what I was expecting when we got called up."

My husband just beamed, like I had at his own good news. "Tragic? No

way, Coop. You worked real hard for that." He leaned down and gave me a brief kiss. "Congratulations, \_Colonel\_."

I kissed him back in return, then pulled away to run a hand through my hair. "I'd be happier about it if I knew for sure it was something I could handle. The brass have put a lot of faith in me, and I just...I don't know if I can live up to their expectations."

"Cooper, what are you talking about? I've been down there with you the whole time, you know. I've seen what you do. If you don't want to trust your own judgment, at least trust me. You're the natural choice for this."

"Maybe, but...Christ, Will. I've only just recovered from getting sniped through the chest. I had a damn heart attack and was a dead slab of meat on Doc's table for five whole minutes before he was able to bring me back. That was a month ago. Then I watched Hayden die, and I almost had a very public breakdown the other night in the rec room over it. I can't sleep - "

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Willis said, holding up his hands. "Slow down, Coop." He crouched in front of me and put his hand on my good shoulder - not the one that had also taken a bullet - and smiled. "Natalie, you're doing fine. I know you've got a lot on your plate all the time, but you've always dealt with it exceptionally well. If I can be half the major you were, I'd be happy. You're exactly what your Marines need. So don't ever doubt that, and don't worry about everything so much. Just get out there, and do what you do best, honey. The rest will follow."

I rubbed absently at my chest, unconsciously gripping my brand-new set of dogtags. "I guess you're right." I leaned my head back then and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Sorry. It's just...this whole 'new enemy' thing has thrown me for a loop. Before today, it seemed like things were finally getting wrapped up out here. I really thought we'd be going home after this. I miss the kids so much - "

"I know you do, Natalie. And so do I. Hopefully it won't be too long of a wait, though. You'll see." He gestured to the goodies I'd brought from the mess hall, probably to get both our minds off the subject. "These all yours, or do I get a set?"

I chuckled. "No. I picked up two of everything so you could get a jolt of caffeine and some food, too. I know it's not easy flying those birds all day."

He leaned in to kiss me again as he grinned. "Thanks, honey."

"You're welcome." I reached for my own coffee just as he did his and took a long drink. The liquid was tepid by now rather than hot, but it still hit the spot. "Damn. I feel like I'm living in the lap of luxury sometimes, getting to come back up to the ship twice in the last few days for a quick rest and some grub." I frowned. "None of my Marines have it this good."

"True, but they don't have the huge responsibility on their shoulders that you do, either. Don't feel bad." My husband unwrapped the bar

and immediately ate half of it in one big bite. "So what's next, \_Colonel\_? When do you want us to head back down?"

"Soon," I replied around a mouthful of my own bar. "I actually don't think I'll even have time to shower this trip. Captain Rhodes wants me to write up a report on our initial approach to the ruins and our subsequent encounter with the Prometheans before I go. For Admiral Dartmouth."

Willis suddenly stopped mid-chew. "Wait, what? Prommeans?"

"\_Prometheans\_," I corrected. "Rhodes said that's what we just fought on the island. Mechanical bastards."

"That's what he called you and the spook up here for?"

"Yeah. I'm kind of glad we've actually got some intel on those things now. Should help us fight back."

"So what are they exactly?"

"As far as we know at the moment, they're robotic AIs. I'll send you and the other senior officers on the ground the details when we're back planetside. But nobody knows where they come from, or who made them. It's not old Covie stuff, not new Storm stuff, and I kind of doubt the Flood could've created them." I shrugged. "But hell, I could be wrong. That's up to the spook to determine. Our job is just to find a way to eliminate them."

"Holy shit," my husband said then. "A brand-new enemy. I was right."

"Yeah, you were. Rhodes said we're getting some reinforcements in in the next few days, too. So we're not completely screwed if things get crazy."

The one thing I didn't mention yet to my husband was the portals we'd found inside the ruins. I figured that was a need-to-know thing for now, and I didn't want him even more worried about me fighting on the ground.

Finally, Willis released a sigh. "What about my little brother, Coop? How's he holding up? I know he went inside those ruins with you guys. He gave me a pretty convincing line so I let him."

"He's fine," I answered sincerely. "He did pretty good with everything, even the new stuff." I gave him a look. "Kid's growing up."

"I know. That's what he said to me that convinced me. Said he was nineteen now, almost twenty, and that he'd already dealt with a lot on his own here on Khan in the years since he left Mars. It was time for me to let him off the leash."

I took my husband's hand and squeezed. "I'm glad you made that choice. He's more capable than you know. I think this'll be good for both of you."

"I hope so. It's just...hard to do, after what happened." He sucked

in a deep breath. "I thought he was dead for all these years, so seeing him suddenly alive again...my protective instinct just increased tenfold."

"But you know he's okay now, Will. And you can both start to move on."

My husband nodded, and I lifted my hand then to run it through his short hair. He briefly closed his hazel eyes and pressed his head against it.

"You really have to work on that report now?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah. We don't have much time."

He opened his eyes and smirked at me as he reached for my hand, still in his hair. "Because I had something else in mind now that we're here."

I smirked, too. "I'm sure you do, but - "

Willis cut me off when he pulled me in for a kiss. It was soft and delicate at first, but still managed to stir something in both of us. It'd been a chaotic and emotion-filled past few days for us, first in dealing with my best friend's death, then gearing up for the assault on the island, and now knowing that we were facing something utterly unknown to us that we'd soon have to return groundside to fight. The unspoken news that we weren't going home as expected also put a damper on things. But the promotions had been nice, and I soon found that so was this.

Things heated up quickly from there, so fast that I momentarily forgot all about the report and simply focused on my husband's deep kisses and his touch. In minutes we'd clambered onto our bunk, already half-undressed, and shortly after that, we were both lost to a sea of passion.

## 5. Chapter 4: Back to Work

### **\*\*Chapter Four: Back to Work\*\***

I could hear Willis's soft snores in the background as I spent the remaining time aboard ship typing up my report in our quarters. Twice I stopped writing and pushed my hands through my shoulder-length hair, let down for the moment and still damp from the fast shower I'd taken. I'd already included more clips of the initial encounter with our new enemy from my helmet cam feed as we'd approached the ruins in my missive, as well as the picture Lieutenant Lloyd had taken of the weapon we'd found in the dirt after one of the Promethean Knights was killed...or disintegrated or whatever it was they did. I knew the spook had already turned in the actual weapon to Captain Rhodes, to be sent back to some ONI facility for testing and study. But after a certain point, I realized with growing frustration that I just couldn't find the words to convey what I'd seen.

Thankfully, by that time I was almost done. I knew things wouldn't take much longer to wrap up despite my sudden lapse, so I decided to take a quick break and got up to go over to Willis. He looked

peaceful sleeping on his back in our bed, and I couldn't help the small smile that came to my face. I hated that I had to wake him up so he could get ready to take us back groundside...but if I needed to do it, I was glad we were in a private space so I could do it like this.

I leaned down and kissed him softly on the lips, sliding a hand up to cup the side of his cheek. He had just a day's worth of stubble beginning to grow there, and the small hairs scraped lightly against my skin.

"Will, honey, wake up," I whispered.

Finally he stirred. I envied him that he'd had time to catch some zees after we'd finished, but I also realized that it was much harder to wake from a deep sleep than it was to just keep going and stay awake, like I had. My husband blinked up at me with his hazel eyes for a moment, looking beyond drowsy with his short hair mussed. Still, he looked so good I leaned in to kiss him again, a little harder this time.

That finally elicited a response as he kissed me back.

"What time is it?" he mumbled.

"Late evening planetside," I replied after checking my watch. "We should get back down soon. I'm almost done with my report. Sorry I had to wake you."

Willis just grinned, still sleepy. "As long as you wake me up like that, I have no problem with it." He pulled my face in closer this time and pressed his lips against mine. "I love you, Cooper."

"I love you, too, Will," I said with a smile. "But you should hurry if you want to shower before we go. I'll only be another few minutes here and then I'm gearing up."

"All right."

I watched as he slowly got up, swung his legs off the side of the bunk, and ran both hands across his face to try to come to full alertness. He hadn't been wearing anything while he'd slept beneath the sheets, so I stood there a moment to take in the sight, leaning back against the edge of the desk.

Willis glanced up and smirked as he caught me. "What?"

"Nothing," I answered slyly. "Like I said, getting back to my report now."

"Uh-huh." He paused to kiss the side of my neck as I turned. "Don't think I didn't notice you looking."

After pulling on a pair of boxers and his T-shirt, my husband stopped to grab a towel and then opened the hatch and left. I expected him back in about five minutes, so I hurried to sit back down at the desk and complete the report.

Downing the last dregs of my coffee, now cold, and stuffing the last bite of bar in my mouth, I returned to the task at hand. I finished

describing the fight as best I could, made sure to mention the comments Lloyd had made about the portals inside the ruins, and tied it in with what I thought was happening with the Storm on the mainland, too - that they'd been getting their extra troops in through the portals, and that they'd eventually left the island not only because they had a vested interest in the rest of the planet like I'd initially thought, but also because they were being driven out by the Prometheans on Qamar. I ended the message with the skirmish that we'd been through earlier this afternoon, and then I was finally done.

And just in time, too. I heard the hatch open behind me again as soon as I hit "send" and Willis appeared, dressed in a fresh shirt and underclothes and sporting wet hair, which he vigorously towelled dry while he searched the room for his flight suit.

"Coop, have you seen my - "

"Over in the corner," I replied. Various articles of clothing had landed all over the room in our haste earlier. As it was, I searched for a few missing items myself now, since I had both my combat boots in hand, but no socks. Luckily though, all my important gear had been set aside sooner and was all in one place by the desk. I pulled out a fresh pair of socks from the closet and the two of us finished dressing in a hurry.

Once I put up my hair again with an elastic band, per regulations while in uniform, I started in on the heavier equipment, strapping on my torso armor over my battledress jacket and then picking up my helmet and DMR. Willis zipped his suit up to his neck and grabbed his helmet as well.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Yup." He leaned over to give me one last kiss, which I reciprocated. "I'll head down to the hangar bay and get the pre-flight checks started. You can go find the spook."

"Okay. I should be down in ten."

It was as we split off to go in opposite directions down the corridor that I wondered if this was what my new rank had in store for me now: more mission-planning, directing, and report-writing than actual groundside combat. I figured that was probably what was expected of me, but I'd never shied away from a fight before. I'd do what I had to to keep myself safe to be there for my family and my Marines, but I'd be in the thick of it just as often, always doing my part. I wasn't going to leave everything to my men and women while I sat back. That'd never been my style before, and an upgrade in rank wasn't going to change that.

\* \* \*

><p>Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd was hiding out in the officers' rec room on the ship when I found him. He wasn't holding a drink as he had the last time I'd run into him here a couple nights ago, but rather it looked like he was playing a round of solitaire with himself with a deck of real cards. I was faintly curious as to why he wasn't just using the program in his datapad, but as we both had more pressing duties to attend to, I didn't stop to ask.<p>



"Lloyd, let's go," I said to him without preamble. "Pelican's waiting on us."

The spook, still dressed in his black ONI fatigues like before, got up right away and shoved the cards in his pocket. "Yes, ma'am. I'm ready."

"Any news from your sister?"

He nodded, looking much more relieved than he had been on the flight up. "Yeah. Got a letchip from her about an hour ago. Said they've been pretty busy so she couldn't send me anything sooner, but she's doing good."

"That's great. Ready to get back at it?"

He nodded. "Affirmative, Major."

I flashed my lapel at him then from beneath my chestplate. "Sounds like you've got some outdated info there, Lieutenant."

"Oh, wow. I'm sorry, ma'am. I meant Colonel. When did that happen? If I may ask."

"Just after you left. The admiral and Captain Rhodes thought we could use a revamp of the senior command after all the fighting that's happened. Fill holes in the roster and whatnot."

"I see. Well, congratulations, ma'am."

"Thanks," I said with a small grin. "Now come on. We've got to get moving."

\* \* \*

><p>The flight back to the planet's surface was a brief one, just as it had been going up. Despite the news that an additional UNSC vessel was going to be making its way to Khan in a few more days, there hadn't been any Storm activity out in orbit so far - none the entire time we'd been here, in fact. Although the <em>Suave Affair</em> had encountered an enemy ship when we'd still been four days out, it had quickly been destroyed. Before today that conspicuous absence hadn't made much sense to me, as I figured a place so prized by the Remnant would have been attended to by more vessels. Now, though, I knew it was because the ex-Covies had something far better and more convenient up their sleeve - the use of the portals we'd found inside the ruins on Qamar.

And now, it was my job to make sure they couldn't return through that back door.

But first things first. As soon as I landed, I knew my first task was to get together with what was now my senior staff and make sure everyone was aware of their new positions, as well as our current situation.

When we hit dirt, I said my goodbyes to Willis and watched him take off into the air again, almost as fast as he'd touched down to let Lloyd and I disembark. I was left feeling disappointed that our brief

interlude was over, but I knew there was plenty of business we both needed to attend to now on our own. So, shivering slightly in the cooler late evening breeze, I pulled on my helmet and opened up a COM channel to my aide.

"Porter? This is Cooper. I need you to gather at my coordinates now. We're back dirtside. Bring your squad along, too."

"Yes, ma'am," the staff sergeant replied. "We'll be there in three minutes."

True to his word, Staff Sergeant Porter arrived shortly, the rest of his team following behind. In the meantime, I'd sent messages to Captain Cole Warfield, in charge of the 904th, and my XO Captain Shawn Harris, who'd now become CO of the 8th Engineers in my place, to meet with us, too. I frowned as I knew the island landscape was nearly void of any adequate cover for the briefing, but I hoped that our presence beside our Scorpion tank and with the squad of Marines acting as security around us, we'd be okay.

So long as the Storm or Prometheans didn't appear out of thin air and drop a cannon round on us.

Knowing how dangerous gatherings of all the senior officers were on the battlefield, I kept it quick. We formed a circle amongst ourselves while Porter's squad kept up a loose perimeter around us, trying not to draw too much attention to the meeting, and crouched.

Captain Harris stooped next to me, while Warfield was on the other side.

"Congratulations on your promotion, ma'am," the dark-haired, dark-skinned Marine said.

"Thanks, Shawn," I responded. "But I wasn't the only one to get the rank up. The brass decided that you and Cole are due for promotions as well." I presented them both with the boxes of their new insignias, yet didn't dare show them off here in the open. "Congratulations. You two are now majors, and each CO of your respective battalions. Do us proud."

Harris seemed just as surprised as Willis and I had been aboard the Affair. At least outwardly, Warfield looked indifferent.

"Thank you, ma'am. This means a lot," Harris said.

The other captain replied gruffly, "Yeah. Thank you, Colonel."

Holding my DMR diagonally across my middle, barrel pointed low, I said, "Those weren't the only new developments. We finally got a name on what we're fighting now, too. They're called Prometheans. Everything else you need to know are in the data packets I've sent you. Do not share those with anyone other than your XOs. Use what you learn to direct your battalion, but try to gloss over the rest for now. We've still got our spook investigating things for us at the moment, so details are forthcoming."

Major Harris nodded, while Major Warfield remained silent, his own

expression neutral.

"Anything happen that I need to know about while I was away?" I asked then.

"No, ma'am. Ever since the last few fighters, uh, teleported out, there's been nothing," my former XO replied.

"Cole?"

"Same at the designated fallback point, Colonel."

"Okay. That's good. But don't get too complacent. Those ruins aren't just for show, so make sure you keep your heads on a swivel at all times and watch for movement. It's not guaranteed that the Storm won't come back, either."

"What are your orders, ma'am?" Warfield questioned.

"Maintain your positions for now," I answered. "I know everybody's tired from the assault today. You all did well. Make sure your troops get some rest, grab a bite to eat, and remember to rotate the companies you've got out on perimeter watch and patrol duty. Harris, you're near the ruins, so stay extra sharp."

"Yes, ma'am."

"When do we make our next move?"

"You'll learn in your data packet that we've got a friendly ship due to arrive in orbit soon. Should be just another couple days out now. If things look quiet, we sit tight till they get here and try to coordinate with the civilian scientists to give them access to the ruins, see what intel they can gather for us. If things are hot, we clear the area and make sure everything's secure before they fly in." I shifted my weight then as just the thought of what I was about to say next brought on the beginnings of a headache. "And tomorrow I'll be heading back to the mainland to talk to Mayor Laraza in Redwood Falls."

Major Cole Warfield immediately scoffed. "That ass hat? Why?"

It didn't escape my notice that again, the newly-minted major didn't include the honorific.

"Because I believe the local population deserves to know what's at their doorstep, Major," I said with a slight edge in my voice. "Regardless of whom they've elected to lead them. Any more questions?"

"No, ma'am," Harris replied.

Warfield just shook his head.

"All right. Get back to your battalions then. Go through those packets tonight and brief your men in the morning. Remember to give them the short version only - just info on the types of new enemies they can expect to see. The rest is need-to-know."

Harris nodded curtly and left, heading back to the 8th Engineers up

the hill. Warfield, on the other hand, remained.

"Something else, Cole?" I asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, turning to face me directly now. "I just wanted to say I respected my CO Major Hayden a great deal, and I hope to follow in his footsteps."

"He was a good man," I said quietly. "A great friend, and an even better field officer. You'd do well to follow his example."

Warfield acknowledged my words with a slight nod - and a faint sneer that I didn't catch until he'd finished speaking. "That's true, Colonel," he said as he turned to leave. "The person I can't say I respect yet is you."

## 6. Chapter 5: More Than the Eye Can See

### \*\*Chapter Five: More Than the Eye Can See\*\*

Not even the new major's words could keep me this side of sleep when I finally found a spot to lie down and rest in the cool island night. I'd made all the preparations against further attack that I could, issued all the orders I could think of, and now all there was left to do was wait and see what the next day had in store for us. I was glad for the brief respite and took advantage, eventually dozing off beneath one of the blown-out palm trees that had weathered the fighting earlier, once again surrounded by Porter's squad for my protection. My last thought before I went to sleep was how much I missed the bed in my quarters on the Affair, and Willis sleeping beside me. Then I was out.

I didn't know how long I'd been asleep when the sudden sound of loud gunfire and heavy movement woke me. As soon as I got up I noticed my aide was already crouched just in front of me, his weapon held to bear with the remainder of his squad on alert around us. My pulse spiked at all the noise despite myself, though after a moment of careful listening, it sounded like the activity wasn't directed at us. I hefted my DMR but held the gun loosely in my hands.

"Josh?" I whispered in the dark, just before I tapped my helmet with one hand to open up the night vision suite so I could see better. "What's going on?"

My aide answered without looking back, keeping his total focus on what lay in front of us. "Don't know yet, ma'am. Just heard the sounds and got up, same as you. I'd respectfully suggest â€" "

"Wait one, Staff," I said, cutting him off. "Let me get a hold of the major."

"Yes, ma'am."

Much as I wanted to avoid contact with the newly promoted Warfield, for obvious reasons, I knew I couldn't at a time like this. Something was happening, maybe not here but fairly close by, and I wanted to know about it.

"Major Warfield, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. Please

respond."

The response wasn't immediate, but not too delayed, either.

"Warfield here."

"We're hearing gunfire and movement up here near the ridge, Major," I said. "Any idea what it's about?"

"Yes, Colonel. One of my companies is currently engaged with hostiles as we speak."

"I can see that. Storm or Prometheans?"

"Storm, ma'am."

I could tell he'd forced himself to say that last word â€" he could only go so long excluding it before it bordered on insubordination, and he knew that. Major Warfield may have been a bit of an ass but he wasn't stupid. Though I wanted to let out a frustrated sigh at his behavior, I swallowed it down and continued as if nothing were amiss. There were much bigger fish to fry at the moment.

And, truth be told, I was kind of relieved we were facing our old enemies again rather than the tough and still-mysterious new ones. Though it was surprising that the Remnant had suddenly reappeared so soon.

"Right," I replied. Then, gripping my rifle tighter, I added, "Send the location to my HUD, Major. My security detail and I are heading out to take a look. In the meantime, you stay with the rest of your battalion, Cole, and let me know if anything else crops up."

"Acknowledged, Colonel."

The major's response was gruff and strained, as I'd expected it to be. I inwardly sighed. If we were going to be working closely together from now on along with my former XO, I knew our dynamic had to change â€" and I still had no clue what he thought I'd done wrong. So I finally decided to call him out on it.

"Warfield," I said in a purposefully easygoing tone, "if we've got a problem here, we better solve it now."

The only answer I received, however, was a brusque, "Later." Then the connection cut.

Though the new major's attitude continued to vex me, I pushed all other thoughts aside for now and focused solely on the task at hand â€" finding out how and why the Storm had shown up again, and making sure we gave those bastards a one-way ticket to their graves like the others. I turned to face Porter again as soon as the coordinates and a waypoint were uploaded to my HUD.

Tapping his shoulder, I ordered, "Staff, let's move."

\* \* \*

><p>Since I'd decided to stop and rest closest to Warfield's battalion's lines upon landing, it didn't take us long to arrive on scene. The closer we got to the fighting, the louder the sounds of weapons' discharge got â€" and the closer Porter's squad of Marines got to hovering around me. I finally had to order them to spread out a little more and give me room to maneuver and see what was going on, although the flashes of bright plasma lighting up the night sky made it pretty plain to see.<p>

Somewhere down below the edge of the ridge, there were Storm troops.

Searching through the FOF tags on my HUD, my helmet's electronics zeroed in on the highest-ranking Marine officer present in the skirmish, a captain, and I instantly opened up a COM channel to her as I crept my way closer to edge.

"Captain Sogaard, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," I said over the radio, trying my best to block out the sounds of the fight all around us. "Want to give me a sitrep?"

"Yes, ma'am," the female officer replied in a hurry. "My company and I were tasked to take over patrol duties about an hour ago, to make sure the lines were quiet. It was our turn. One of the squads circled close to the edge and spotted the Storm below. I guess a jumpy private opened up before further orders could be issued, and here we are, Colonel."

"I see. Enemy strength?"

"It's hard to tell from up here, ma'am. We'd have to get down there to know for sure. I can tell you now that they're giving my company a run for their money, though."

"\_Dammit\_." And here I'd been hoping for at least a few hours of peace without any activity. It seemed the island was constantly swarming with one group of baddies or another â€" and this was supposedly \_after\_ we'd already defeated the larger unit of Remnant troops that had remained.

"Colonel? Orders?"

"Keep up the fire, Captain," I answered. "I'll bring in another platoon to help, along with some sharpshooters. Just sit tight for now, Marine."

"Yes, ma'am."

I could have called in the tankers, too, as well as the 'Hogs left, since the 904th Battalion still had a full complement of armor and vehicles at their disposal. But because of the angle, and because the Storm troops were firing from down below on the beach, I knew anything other than foot soldiers would likely be useless. I didn't want to bring Willis and his squadron â€" no, \_squadrons\_, I reminded myself â€" into this, either. Not so long as our ground troops were able to handle it on their own. I wanted to save our heavy hitters for when we truly needed them.

I figured the extra manpower and snipers I called in would be enough to help level the playing field on the ridge. I'd allocate more

resources from there if I felt we needed it.

Only once my commands were issued did I turn my attention back to the fight going on around me. I noticed that in the meantime, Staff Sergeant Porter and his squad had inched up close to the edge and were already firing their weapons at a frenetic pace, tagging the Storm troops from high above and sending their bodies sprawling onto the sandy rocks beneath us, bright sprays of multi-colored blood bursting in the dark night.

Finally bringing my own rifle to bear, I crouched beside one of my aide's Marines and joined the fray myself. With my helmet's night vision, I was able to zoom in on targets below through my weapon's scope and see them all clear as day â€" though the image was an eerie green rather than full color.

All along the beach, various aliens fired up at us with their plasma weapons, the smaller Jackals and Grunts mostly taking refuge behind the rocks, the larger Elites stepping forward fearlessly to squeeze off deadly glowing orbs of plasma at us. I took careful aim at the first enemy fighter I spotted â€" a Grunt that had foolishly followed one of the Elites out of cover â€" and pulled the trigger.

My DMR's initial burst stopped the alien in its tracks, making it stumble backward, but it was my follow-up shot that did him in. As its small body bucked back against the sandy ground, I noticed the Elite glance up and roar as more and more of its comrades were slain. Even from this distance, zoomed in with my scope I could tell he was gunning for me now. Acting fast, I quickly flattened myself against the dirt to avoid getting shot.

It was a good thing I did. If I'd remained crouching where I was, I would've had plasma-sized hole in my neck now.

I knew the shot hadn't actually come from the Elite, though. The thin, tight purple beam of plasma wasn't a round that emerged from a weapon they usually carried. It was a beam rifle shot, for marksman â€" that meant Jackals. And since I'd already been on the receiving end of not one but two of their sniper rounds â€" from one of the UNSC's own damn guns â€" and barely survived, I wasn't exactly itching to be the recipient of a third.

So, through the open COM I shouted, "Marines, we've got sharpshooters down below! Watch it! Snipers, target them first! Let's go!"

From there the skirmish continued to be an odd exchange, since we obviously had the high ground advantage, but the Storm below seemed to have the edge as far as strength went. As our own numbers climbed once the reinforcement platoon arrived, though, the tide started to turn.

A few of the Marines beside me even pulled grenades from their web belts, primed them, and tossed them down onto the beach. That was a tactic the Remnant couldn't use on us in their current position, though most of the Elites saw the explosives coming and dodge-rolled out of the way, while Jackals simply hid behind their shields and took it. Only some unlucky and particularly oblivious Grunts managed to get the brunt of those attacks, and they paid for their inattention with bursting body parts and light blue blood that splattered onto the rocks and sand.

Still, though, the Jackal sharpshooters continued to do the most damage to own lines. Several Marines firing onto the sand from the edge of the ridge were shot in the head despite my warning and their own caution, caught unaware as they reloaded or momentarily forgot in the heat of the moment about the alien snipers below. Others who stood taller were tagged in the stomach. The lucky ones tumbled backward against the ground and were immediately attended to by medics who could try to save them. A couple others, however, fell forward and were inevitably killed by the sharp drop, their screams ringing in my ears even amid the constant cacophony of battle. A cold shiver went down my spine.

It was as I crawled up to the edge myself once more, careful not to get brained by a Jackal round, that I heard the female captain's voice over my COM again.

"Colonel Cooper, they're falling back! Look!"

At her words my first instinct was obviously to do just that, but I didn't want my curiosity to get me killed. I still pulled myself closer to the edge slowly, and only once I felt it was safe did I bring my rifle level to the beach below again and take a good look through the scope.

Now that the Storm were on the run, disappearing into some outcrop underneath us where we couldn't reach or bolting off to the side over the rocks close to where the ocean waves languidly lapped at the shore, I could see just how much carnage we'd managed to leave behind in their lines. Alien bodies littered the area below, while several different colors of blood and discarded plasma weapons decorated the sandy ground. The number of Remnant troops that were suddenly taking off was rather small, too, in comparison to the amount we'd been fighting when I'd first gotten here.

Still, that didn't mean I was about to let them leave. I'd thought we'd already taken care of the Storm problem on the island, and the 8th Engineer Battalion was guarding the entrance to the portals we'd found in the ruins earlier " so I knew for sure that the extra Storm hadn't come in through there. That left me wondering where these guys had been hiding out this whole time, and why they'd chosen now to make their presence known.

"Cease fire, cease fire!" one of the lieutenants nearby shouted over the radio then, while the alien warriors below us continued their retreat.

I immediately keyed the COM again. "Belay that, Marines! Tag as many as you can get while they're running! We're going after them!"

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD, and our lines suddenly erupted in a rattling chorus of weapons' fire again. Besides the regulars, a few friendly snipers tagged Grunts left and right as they scrambled over the rocks, dropping them hard and fast. The Elites were tougher to get, and the Jackals too clever and quick, but one or two of each of them were taken down as well. I let loose a final burst myself at one of the Jackals, trying hard to take him out since I still had a grudge against the bastards who'd almost succeeded at taking my life for access to better weaponry, but my



shot went wide. I muttered a curse to myself and ducked to reload, my clip spent.

In just a few more minutes the last act of the skirmish was over. One way or another, every single one of the Remnant troops down on the beach had suddenly disappeared out of the fight. I knew we had to move fast if we wanted to catch up, so now that we were no longer actively getting shot at, I pushed myself up to my knees as soon as I finished reloading and started shouting orders again.

"Snipers, stay on the ridge! You provide us with overhead coverage while we go in, clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Captain Sogaard?"

"Colonel?"

"Take one of your platoons and get them to gear up. I want them to rappel down to the beach and go after those alien sons o' bitches. Have the rest of your men follow once the ropes are clear, squad by squad, till everyone's on the shore. I'll get Major Warfield to charge another company with patrol duty."

"Right away, ma'am!"

I turned to Staff Sergeant Porter next. Grabbing the seasoned yet relatively young noncom by his shoulder, I said, "Josh?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You, too. Get your squad together. We're going down with them."

Porter seemed worried about my involvement, as usual. "Colonel, I don't â€" "

"\_Now\_, Staff."

"Yes, ma'am."

While my aide busied himself with readying his Marines, I opened up another channel. "Major Warfield, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. The skirmish is over for now but I'm taking your company after the Storm. I want to know exactly where these bastards are coming from, and how many more we might have to fight. Get another one of your companies to saddle up and get out there on patrol. Tell them to stay sharp. We might get more Remnant troops popping out of someplace else, or maybe even the Prometheans again. Prepare for anything."

I knew the major likely hated the position I'd just put him in, but he had no choice but to swallow it and deal with it, unless he wanted to spend the remainder of our time here on Khan in the brig aboard the Affair. If he ever outright ignored one of my orders, he knew that was going to be the last straw for him.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get it done," he said in a none-too-happy tone.

"Good. Cooper out."

After that, while the rest of the Marines got ready to rappel down the edge of the rise to the beach, I had just one more order of business to attend to. I keyed the COM again, this time opening up a channel to our resident spook.

"Lieutenant Lloyd? It's Cooper."

He answered quickly. "Colonel?"

"Meet me on the ridge, Lieutenant. I'm tagging our location to your HUD now, though I'm sure you've heard what's been going on."

"Yes, ma'am. I was wondering what all the ruckus was. More Prometheans?"

I let out a sigh. "Nope. Not this time, thankfully. It's actually the Storm. Looks like we didn't clean house as thoroughly as I thought with our assault."

"Well, to be fair, that was hard to do without knowing about the chamber under the ruins, ma'am. Now we know they've got more places to hide than just the surface."

"Yeah," I said with a little dejection in my voice. "That's what I was afraid of."

\_As if the fucking Prometheans weren't enough,\_ I thought to myself with a frown.

## 7. Chapter 6: Forging Ahead

**\*\*Chapter Six: Forging Ahead\*\***

**\*\*0459 Hours, February 10, 2558. Qamar Island Ridge, Planet Khan.  
"The Next Step," Outer Colonies. Prologue to the Dawn of the  
Prometheans\*\***

Staff Sergeant Porter and his squad continued to hold a fairly tight formation around me even after the skirmish was over, much to my chagrin. I didn't complain though, since I knew they were just doing their jobs and trying to keep my ass safe – no easy task when I was never much one for staying out of the thick of things.

Already geared up for the climb down to the beach themselves, my aide's squad and I both stood waiting for Captain Sogaard's first platoon to begin their descent. In the brief lull, I pulled back my battledress sleeve a bit to check my watch in the dark. Almost 0500. \_The sun should be coming up in another hour or so,\_ I thought.

And it was also time for me to take my meds. I wasn't sure how long or involved our expedition might be, so I knew it was better to take them now than possibly end up having to go without later. Quickly, before anyone else noticed, I pulled one of the bottles out of my battledress pants and shook out a small pill. Then I stuffed the container back in my cargo pocket and pulled out the other, frowning as I realized that this one looked like it was starting to run low.

The first had my birth control pills in it; the second contained my meds for the nightmares. Without the latter, I wouldn't've so much slept as woken up crying and shaking earlier â€" not helpful for a field officer of any rank, much less mine. I knew I'd have to ask Willis to get me more from the \_Suave Affair\_ next time he went up for supplies. I couldn't afford to have a PTSD episode in the field.

As for the meds I took for more intimate matters, I breathed a discreet sigh of relief when I saw that I still had a pretty decent supply. I'd stopped taking the birth control pills for a while when Doc Reynolds said he'd rendered them more or less useless by way of other drugs when he'd been treating my gunshot wounds, so there were plenty left.

Unfortunately the medic had imparted that key information to me a little late, but thankfully nothing had come of it. Otherwise I would've been aboard the \_Affair\_ now, manning a desk instead of down here on the ground, where I preferred to be â€" although I'd found out yesterday morning before the assault that my husband would've liked that. Willis was all for having another kid, and while I wasn't against it myself, I'd told him it needed to be at the right time. Clearly, this was not.

"Colonel Cooper?"

Startled out of my thoughts, I turned faster than I should have, rapidly shoving the second pill bottle deep in my pockets as I did so. I relaxed when I saw it was just the spook, though. Being an ONI operative, he already knew everything there was to know about me â€" maybe even more than I did myself. With him, I knew there was nothing I needed to hide.

"What do you need, Cal?" I asked, unhooking my canteen from my web belt and taking a long swig to chase down the two pills.

"We're ready now, ma'am," Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd answered. "Sogaard is going to let her platoon get established on the beach first, then once the area's secure she said they'd send for you and your squad. If all goes well, it should take less than four minutes."

I chuckled humorlessly at that as I put my canteen away. "It wasn't too long ago that I was in Sogaard's position, you know. Even with a company command I would've been going down to that beach first along with my Marines. It sucks to have to sit back now and wait for things to get settled before I go in."

"I understand, ma'am. But if you don't want to think of it as being for your \_own\_ protection, think of it as insurance for all the Marines here on the island instead." He looked at me with his blue eyes in the dark. "We need you, Colonel. All of us."

"What all of us really needed was the late Major Hayden here with me," I replied quietly. "He knew the ropes even better than I do and had five years' worth of experience on me. He should've been the one to take over."

"Well, the major's not here anymore, ma'am. We've got you, and I don't think anyone here thinks you're a lesser substitute."

\_Except for Major Warfield, apparently, \_ I thought. But that was enough second-guessing for one day; it was time to get some work done. I stuck a thumb between my DMR's strap and my shoulder and glanced over at the edge of the ridge again, watching as the first squad of one of Sogaard's platoons began to rappel their way down to the beach. I knew it wouldn't be long now until the rest of the platoon was with them, and then, it'd be my turn.

\* \* \*

><p>Just as Lloyd had said, only a few minutes went by from when the Marines touched sand to when the highest-ranking among them, a second lieutenant, hailed me from beneath the ridge.<p>

"Colonel Cooper, this is Second Lieutenant Gage Embers," the Marine said over the COM. "Shore's all clear, ma'am. No activity so far."

"That's good to hear, Lieutenant," I responded. "Wait one and hold there for now. We'll be down shortly."

"Yes, ma'am."

Keeping my weapon slung behind me, I quickly adjusted the strap so that it was positioned diagonally across my back now instead of just hanging off my good shoulder, barrel pointed low. After that, I joined my aide and his squad at the edge of the drop to the beach.

"With your permission, ma'am, I'd like to send my squad down first," Porter said to me as I approached. "We'll provide cover for you and the spook till you're on the ground."

I smiled wryly at the overabundance of caution. "You gonna wrap me up in a bulletproof pod, too, Josh?"

The staff sergeant briefly grinned back. "Can't say it wouldn't've helped a little when you got shot at the outpost, Colonel."

"TouchÃ©, Staff." I finally let out a sigh and nodded. "Okay. Let's do it your way then. Lieutenant Lloyd and I will follow."

"Understood, ma'am."

Again I watched with impatience as even more Marines descended to the shore without me. It didn't take long for Porter and his squad to get down, though, and soon Lloyd and I were pulling the ropes under our haunches, preparing to push off.

Once the grip was tight beneath my gloved hands, I said, "Cal? You ready?"

"Affirmative, Colonel," the spook replied.

"All right. Let's go."

We both pushed off with our boots and let the rope go for a while as

we shot down toward the beach. About a fourth of the way down both of us pulled hard on the rope again, stopping our rapid descent and swinging back toward the face of the cliff to push off a second time with our feet. We did that twice more till we finally reached the bottom and let go.

I opened up a channel to Captain Sogaard then, glad to have my boots back on solid ground. "The initial scouting party's hit the sand, Captain. Go ahead and send down the rest of your company as soon as you can. We'll get started in the meantime."

"Acknowledged, Colonel."

"Make sure the sharpshooters up on the ridge continue to keep a lookout for us as well. Our field of vision down here's pretty limited because of the outcrop."

"Yes, ma'am."

As soon as the connection cut, I looked around myself for the first time while I tore off my gloves. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore was much louder here on the beach, as expected â€" that'd make it hard for us to listen for anything hostile that might be approaching. We wouldn't hear it until it was too late. I realized then that while we were down here, we'd have to rely more on our extra sets of eyes up on the ridge than I would've liked.

There was also the minimal threat posed by the rocks and tide itself â€" closest to the water there was only wet sand, but when the tide rose, we'd be clambering on top of the uneven rocks that made up the ground near the cliff. They'd be wet, too, and slippery. It'd be tough terrain to fight in if we had to.

"Ma'am, what are your orders?" Second Lieutenant Embers asked then. "Which direction to do want us to go in?"

Stuffing my gloves back in my pockets, I pulled my DMR off my back and into my hands again, holding the rifle loosely as I replied. "Take half your platoon to the right, Lieutenant. That's where most of the Storm bastards ran off. I want you to recon only while you're on your own, though. You let me know the moment you've got eyes on and I'll send you some backup before you're clear to engage. We'll have more men down here by then to spread out."

"Yes, ma'am."

"As for the rest of your Marines, they're coming with me for now. I noticed some other Remnant troops run this way, underneath this overhang," I said, pointing upward at the formation several feet ahead of us. "There's got to be a cave or something that way and I want to find out if that's where they were coming from."

"Got it, Colonel. We'll get it done."

"I know you will, Embers. Good luck."

The young second lieutenant nodded and jogged over to the right then to gather two of his squads before setting off. The remainder he sent my way, as ordered. Once the Marines were assembled, I had the most experienced fireteam take point, while Lieutenant Lloyd and I

followed close behind. Porter's squad surrounded the two of us, and the rest of Embers' Marines made up the rear guard.

The ocean waves to our left appeared a dark green in my night vision as we marched carefully across the beach, our boots sinking lightly into the water-saturated sand. Meanwhile, gentle undulations licked at the shore, washing away some of the alien blood that colored the area after our brief skirmish " but not the bodies. Those remained throughout the shoreline beneath the ridge, too heavy to be carried out to sea while the ocean was so placid.

Among the corpses and chunks of alien flesh, a few human bodies were sprinkled here and there, too " Marines who'd been shot and were unlucky enough to have fallen forward off the cliff. I wanted to avert my eyes as I saw the red blood mixing with the blues and purples of the Remnant's in the water, but I couldn't. It was a scene I'd witnessed many times before in my near-eleven years as a Marine, and I suddenly found it strange that even after all that, the sight still made me uneasy.

"Poor guys," Lloyd murmured beside me.

"Yeah," I said just as softly. "Getting shot's bad enough. Landing on those rocks is worse."

A voice flooded into my helmet then, cutting off whatever the spook may have replied. It was the Marine at the head of the column.

"Colonel, we've reached the overhang. Or, you know, under it. There's a cave entrance here, ma'am. What do you want us to do?"

"We go inside, Sergeant," I answered without hesitation. "Let's see if those ex-Covies are home." \_Or maybe our new friendsâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p>My night vision dulled as I took my first steps inside the cave " and I also noticed that the temperature dropped by about ten degrees. It was freezing in here.<p>

"Damn," I said to the Navy lieutenant next to me as we walked, searching the walls ahead for activity. "Should've brought a parka. I'll have to pack that next time."

Lloyd chuckled. "Doesn't help when there's water dripping on our heads, too, Colonel. Feel that?"

A wet smack landed on my bare hands and I shivered again. Other large gobs pattered against my uniform and helmet, though I couldn't feel those quite yet. It'd take a large amount of droplets to penetrate military-grade clothing and equipment.

"Yeah," I responded. "I'm pretty sure it's not raining in here, so where's it coming from?"

"The ceiling, ma'am."

"Great," I muttered. "A dark, dripping cave. Any more omens you'd like to add to the list?"

"How about \_that\_?"

I glanced up and almost jumped when a series of lights suddenly lit up the narrow passageway â€” and nearly blinded me in the process. I quickly switched off my night vision and raised my rifle, but in moments saw that there was nothing to aim at. Not in here, at least.

"Sergeant? Any contacts?" I asked the Marine up at point.

"No, ma'am!" he answered in agitation. "But someone's gotta know we're here!"

"Not necessarily, Marine. Could be automatic."

I looked over at the spook and we exchanged a glance. We'd both seen the same thing inside the ruins, in the big room where the portals were. I knew what this meant before Lloyd even said it.

"This must lead back to the main chamber, ma'am."

I frowned. "But we checked that out. It didn't look like there were any outlets from inside."

"That just means they're hidden pretty well. If you remember, Colonel, we didn't really get a good look at anything when we were in there, just a cursory glance until the Prometheans attacked topside again and we all had to rush out."

"Fuck. So now the Storm have access to this and we don't?"

It was a rhetorical question, and the ONI operative didn't answer. Lloyd had warned me about this earlier, when we'd first approached the ruins, but it hadn't looked like anything like this was possible after going inside. Now it seemed it was. That meant that the 8th Engineers weren't as safe as I thought, and that we really didn't have the only entrance to the portals covered. The Remnant still had access. I knew we had to shut this down right away.

"Marines, keep heading inside," I said over the COM. "I'll send another platoon in after you for backup. Let me know when you reach the end. I want this cave mapped out, \_now\_."

I waited for the acknowledgment lights to wink green across my HUD. Then I grabbed Staff Sergeant Porter by the shoulder as he walked past and turned him around.

"Staff, your squad and the spook and I are leaving. I need to make sure no one goes in after these Marines while they're scoping things out. The Storm are still out there."

"Yes, ma'am."

When we emerged back out onto the beach, I flipped my night vision back on. The considerably warmer air was also a welcome relief. The implications of what we'd just found, however, were not. I opened up a channel to Second Lieutenant Embers.

"Find anything yet?" I asked him.

"That's a negative, Colonel. No sign of the Storm bastards, although I'm not sure where they might've disappeared to this fast."

"I've got some ideas," I muttered. "Make sure there's no caves along the shore over there, Lieutenant. If you find one, tag its location and sent it to me \_immediately.\_ Then sit tight. Do \_not\_ go inside without my express order, is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good. Cooper out."

I cut the connection then and instantly ordered the remainder of Sogaard's company, still on its way down, to maintain watch at the cave's entrance. If the passage did lead to the main chamber beneath the ruins as Lloyd supposed, and I believed it, then we'd have to find a way to keep the Storm from using it. I knew the task was easier said than done, but we couldn't afford to give the ex-Covies that kind of advantage â€" especially not with the Prometheans still roaming the island somewhere, too.

Although I hated to leave all this to my Marines and not help out more myself, I knew I couldn't be in two places at once â€" and there were still other things I needed to get into motion for now. Much as I was reluctant to do so, I had to leave the rest of this up to Captain Sogaard and possibly Major Warfield, while I needed to return up to the ridge.

With an exaggerated sigh, I looked over at the spook again.

"Cal? Ready to climb back up?"

He flashed me an equally dismayed expression.

"Well, if we have to do it, no time like the present, ma'am."

## 8. Chapter 7: Friend of an Enemy

### **\*\*Chapter Seven: Friend of an Enemy\*\***

After making the arduous climb back onto the ridge with the ropes, I immediately got into contact with my other battalion commander and former XO, Major Shawn Harris. Since the 8th Engineers were closest to the ruins, I figured he more than anyone needed to know what we'd just discovered down below on the beach â€" and be sure he was aware that his unit needed to be ready for anything. Harris took the information in stride, as I knew he would, and assured me that he'd take the necessary precautions. Satisfied with the response, I cut the connection, then quickly opened up a new channel â€" this time to our air commander.

"Talon, it's Cooper. How're the skies looking, Major?"

"Dark but clear, Colonel, although it's starting to brighten up a little now ahead of the sunrise," Willis replied. "I saw some firefights going on down there a while ago. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said. "For now, anyway. Things justâ€¦keep



getting more and more interesting around here is all."

"Those new Promethean guys?"

"No. We found out the Storm are back. Looks like that larger force we fought and defeated here yesterday wasn't the last of them."

"Shit. So what now?"

I shrugged to myself, though I knew he couldn't see it. "We root out the rest."

"How did more even show up?"

Willis didn't know about the portals yet, and I still wasn't comfortable spreading the news to everyone, knowing what that might do to morale. "We're looking into it. Listen, Will, I don't have much time to chat. Just keep your eyes peeled up there and be ready to get called in if you're needed."

"Yes, ma'am," my husband responded, although I could tell from his tone that he was a little put out by my evasive answer. I felt bad about it, but the situation was what it was. Until the new UNSC ship came in and we all had to help the scientists get into the ruins to scope them out, I wasn't about to blow open the lid on everything before I needed to.

Sometimes being in charge sucked.

"Anything else, Colonel?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm going to need your brother for something on the mainland. Are you okay with that?"

"Depends what it is, Coop."

"Well, much as I'd like to avoid it, I need to go meet with Mayor Laraza about what we found here. Bring him up to speed on our new enemies and stuff. Matt used to be a reb and he knows his way around the city, so I'd like to have him back me up over there."

My husband sighed. "All right. As long as you have each other's six. And tell that Laraza bastard that if he tries hitting on my wife again, his next meeting's going to be with my fist."

I chuckled. "Will do, honey. Although if I don't come out riddled with bullets, I'll already consider that a success. He's alternately charming and homicidal so you never know what you're going to get."

"Just stay safe, Cooper."

"You, too, Talon. Cooper out."

\* \* \*

><p>Shortly after our talk, a Pelican landed nearby for me and Matthew to jog into. I would've loved to have brought Willis along, just to see the look on Laraza's face when my husband stared him down, but I knew that wasn't possible. Willis had his own command to

attend to, so the job fell to one of his pilots instead.<p>

I didn't realize he'd sent someone I knew until the back hatch opened up.

"Welcome aboard, Colonel," Captain Heat, Willis's best friend, said to me with a grin. "I know I'm not the man of your dreams, but I hope I can be a suitable replacement for this flight."

Matthew shot me a look, and I jokingly clamped my hands over his ears.

"Heat, this is my brother-in-law. Impressionable mind."

"Oh." Anyone else would've looked sheepish, but not Heat. He just stuck out his hand at the younger Hawk. "Captain Brandon Heat, kid. I'm your brother's wingman and his best buddy. I promise I'm not trying to steal his wife."

"Heat just likes to act like an idiot sometimes," I said to Willis's little brother as I released my hold on his head and moved to take a seat. "You just have to get used to it." Still, I held up my left hand and pointed to my wedding ring then as Matthew sat down beside me. "Visual aid, Brandon, in case you forget."

The captain laughed and turned back towards the cockpit. "It's okay, Cooper. I see it on Willis's finger all the time. I know you're off-limits."

Matthew and I sat in silence for a moment as we listened to the transport's engines spooling up. My brother-in-law still had a frown on his face.

"I don't like our pilot, Nat," he said to me petulantly.

I waved a dismissive hand at him. "He's been Willis's best friend since flight school. We've all known each other for a long time. He's a good guy. Helped us out with Gabriel a few times too in the past when we got in a bind."

"My nephew, you mean?"

"Yep, your oldest one."

The engines got louder and we finally lifted off. Heat's voice came flooding through the intercom in the troop bay soon after, no doubt trying to keep my mind occupied since he knew how nervous I got about flying. I was already trying my best not to fiddle with anything on my person, so as not to give away my anxious state of mind to Matt.

"So how're the kids, Natalie?"

"Doing good, last we heard," I replied. "They're staying with Willis's parents on Mars while we're gone." A small smile came to my face unbidden. "Did Will tell you we might be getting another pilot in the family soon?"

"One of your sons?"

"Our daughter," I answered.

Captain Heat chuckled. "Yup, already knew about that one. Willis would bring her by the airbase sometimes back on Earth, while they waited for you to get off-duty for the evening. Gabe and Liam would look around for a bit and lose interest, but not her. Liv got her little hands into everything and wanted to know what each part of the ship did."

My smile widened. "Sounds like her. She keeps drawing pictures of anything airborne at daycare with her piloting inside." I shrugged. "Olivia looks almost exactly like me but when it comes to that, she takes right after her dad. I don't know."

"You think Liam or Gabe might want to become a grunt like their mom?"

I snorted. "I hope not. If they do, I'll try to steer them down another path." I let out a sigh. "Don't get me wrong; I love being a Marine and if I had to do it all over again, I'd do it in a heartbeat, with no second thoughts. It's a part of me, in my blood. But it also comes with a lot of hardships I wouldn't want my kids to endure."

Heat's voice sobered when he spoke again. "You must miss the three of them a lot, huh?"

"More than you know, Heat."

"Willis does, too. He talks about them all the time. And you."

To keep the sudden hurt from engulfing me, I bumped shoulders with my brother-in-law. "See? You're getting to learn some about your niece and nephews." I leaned back against the bulkhead and closed my eyes then before he could reply. "Hopefully this'll be over soon, so we can all get back home and see them again."

\* \* \*

><p>When we touched down on mainland Khan near the city of Redwood Falls, it was a bittersweet moment. Part of me almost missed the place we'd called home for the past few months, since the terrain was so similar to my homeplanet of Mars, but another part hated being back to the scene of so much carnage and heartache. Outpost Columbia, where we'd originally been stationed, had been destroyed well before our departure for the island. I'd taken two sniper rounds through the back and nearly died here. And, most importantly, my own best friend had lost his life in the forest, yet another victim of the ex-Covenant.<p>

Emotions bubbled up inside me for a moment, but I quickly swallowed them down. I kept a tight grip on my DMR's strap as it hung off my shoulder to steel myself, then stepped forward off the craft.

Turning to Heat, I said, "Hold here with the bird, Captain. We should be back in less than an hour. Seal it up tight in the meantime. You never know."

"Yes, ma'am," the seasoned pilot replied. "I'll just sit back and

keep an ear on the radio chatter."

"Good idea." I glanced over at Willis's baby brother next. "Matt, get rid of the gun. Then see if you can tell me where this address is."

Matthew Hawk looked at me incredulously for a moment when I told him to ditch his MA5D, but he soon noticed from my expression that I was serious. It already seemed suspicious enough that I was bringing my DMR, but having been Laraza's target before, I wasn't about to part with my firearms. That, in his own quirky way, I knew the mayor would understand. Taking along an armed double he would not.

As soon as Matt set the assault rifle down in the Pelican's troop bay, I handed him the small scrap of paper with the address and we started off. He read it as I kept my eyes scanning ahead and around us for movement â€" any sign that this was an ambush or that we weren't really welcome in the city anymore.

I knew Major Oliver Hayden would've called me nuts for even taking the chance, especially with the twin bullet scars still visible on my left shoulder and chest. The one thing my late best friend and I hadn't always seen eye-to-eye on was how to handle the locals â€" namely the local rebels. Having fought them out here in the Outer Colonies shortly after the War ended, Hayden hadn't wanted anything to do with them. To him they were simply our enemies as much as the Storm, nothing more. To me, they were still people, and I'd tried my best during our time here to reach out and help broker a peace between us.

It had worked when we'd pooled our resources to defeat the Remnant forces here on the mainland, which would have certainly annihilated us had we tried to fight them separately. The moment that battle was over, however, Laraza had made it clear to me that the truce was void once we left for Qamar â€" and that while he wouldn't follow us to the island and attack us there, we'd better not come back. His tune seemed to have changed now given the urgent message I'd sent him about the meeting, but with him, you could never be sure.

"Um, Natalie?" Matthew asked beside me then. "You sure this is the right place?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Wellâ€¦it looks like you're meeting in a nightclub."

I frowned. "Great."

We got to the nightclub about twenty minutes later, amid curious and anxious stares at our presence. Thankfully, though, since it was still early morning, most of the streets were deserted, and no one tried to shoot at me. The club itself looked closed, too, probably having just shut down an hour or two ago for the night. I knocked on the door, then turned to face Matthew again.

"I want you to wait outside in case shit hits the fan in there, for whatever reason," I said to him in a low voice. I quickly pulled my sidearm from its holster on my hip and handed it to him. "Here. Hide this in your waistband. Anything happens to me, you hoof it back to the Pelican right away and hightail it out. Got it?"

My brother-in-law looked nervous, but he'd been through a few firefights by now. He gathered up his courage and nodded. "Got it, Nat."

"Good. I should be back soon."

The door opened then and Giovanna Torri, Laraza's assistant, ushered me inside. Her presence was typical and didn't send up any red flags, but I found myself gawking around like a tourist nonetheless. I tried to tell myself it was for my own safety, but really I'd just never seen a place like this before. It was much bigger than what I'd imagined for a small Outer Colony city, and some low music and a few of the gyrating colored lights remained on, despite it now being closed.

Seated at a table in the back on his own, Mayor Javier Laraza chuckled as I came into view.

"Have you never been inside of a club before, Major?" he asked. He made a subtle gesture to Torri, and the lights and sound suddenly stopped.

I snorted as I approached his table. "I was married and commissioned at twenty and had my first kid at twenty-three. And there was a war going on. I didn't have time to go sightseeing much outside the O-Club." I carefully sat down across from him. "Mostly just dive bars close to base. Nothing like this."

"Your loss then, I'm afraid. Drink?"

I noticed the impressive collection of liquor bottles behind the bar and couldn't help myself, regardless of the hour and location; the stock available on the Affair was pretty limited, and so too was the access while I was groundside. I nodded. "Sure, why not? Let's go with a scotch. I'll consider it my breakfast."

The mayor signaled to Torri again, then quirked an eyebrow at me. "You're not afraid I might poison you?"

"Nah. I don't think you'd dirty your hands yourself."

A corner of Laraza's lips curled upward at that as two small tumblers and a bottle of amber liquid arrived at the table. The mayor poured a few fingers for himself and a few for me, and we each took a sip before he spoke again.

Laraza gestured grandly at the place. "I see you appear to enjoy my establishment. You should come here with your husband one night, on the houseâ€¦if I don't kill you first."

This time, instead of getting angry, I smirked as I downed another swallow of the alcohol. "Get in line. I'm sure the Storm want to beat you to it, and our new alien friends, too."

"Yes. You warned me of them in your message." He leaned forward in his seat. "You think I will let your Marines return to the mainland if you scare me with stories?"

"No stories, Mr. Laraza. I brought proof." I pulled out a small data

chip from my breast pocket and set it on the table in front of him. "In there's all we got so far. Pictures, video, audio. Since I know you never went sniffing around on the island, I know you probably never even knew you had alien visitors â€" \_other\_ alien visitors, I mean. But these guys are different. They're sentient AIs. Robots. And they pack an even bigger punch than the ex-Covies."

Laraza frowned, looking at the chip in his hand and no doubt digesting my words. "If what you say is true, what is it you want me to do about it?"

I took another drink and said, "I want us to extend the truce again, with the possibility of getting your men to help us out on the island if need be. It's quickly becoming a very sticky situation out there, and we might need the help. Or a staging area the Storm and our new buddies can't hit as easily. Basically, I want to know we won't get stabbed by you if we turn our backs for a minute while we deal with this."

The mayor gave me a tight-lipped smile. "You remember that I told you when you left the island that if you failed to contain the situation there, we'd attack again."

"I remember. That's why I wanted to show you that if you do, you'd be left to deal with this new problem on your own. Khan is still at risk, Mr. Laraza. And like it or not, once again, we're you're best line of defense."

His eyes flashed with anger then. "Why ask for our help when you have a new UNSC ship coming in in a few days, eh? You think I don't know what you government types are doing?" He shoved the chip back to my side of the table. "I know when I am being played, Major Cooper, and I do not care for it."

It was my turn to press now. "First of all, it's \_Lieutenant\_ \_Colonel\_ now, Mr. Laraza. Secondly, this is not a ploy. The Prometheans are out there. Watch the damn clips. Even we don't know what the hell they're capable of yet or where they're from, but you can bet your ass you don't want them a hop, skip, and a jump from your house. Or your precious \_club\_." I snorted again, utterly astounded that it had taken us Marines landing on this planet to find out all the shit that island was crawling with. Apparently the locals had sat back and done absolutely nothing this entire time, and now we were the ones left to deal with the mess. "Try cleaning up your fucking yard once in a while, \_Mayor\_. You'd be amazed at all the junk that's back there, ready to strike."

Laraza suddenly jumped up to his feet, chair clattering to the floor behind him, fire blazing in his eyes. For a moment I thought he was going to reach out and try to punch me. But then he took several deep breaths and regained control.

"Get out, \_Colonel\_. \_Now\_."

"No truce then, huh?" I said as I stood from the table. "After everything we've done for you? After everything I had to swallow?" I finally met his gaze. "You tried to kill me, Laraza. I didn't forget. But I know when to put my own personal crap aside and do what's best for my people. You should do the same."

Just before I left, I turned back and added, "Because if the Prometheans come in in force, none of us are safe."

## 9. Chapter 8: Parting Gift

Author's Note: So my internet at home decided to crap out, and there's no viable way to fix it until I'm back in the States in a month. In the meantime, I'll try my best to get updates out through other means. There may or may not be some delays, depending how things go. But I'll keep writing. :)

\* \* \*

<p><strong><span>Chapter Eight: Parting Gift<span>\*&#160;

Matthew was still standing just outside the club when I emerged, right where I left him. He looked anxious loitering there in his borrowed UNSC Marine fatigues without insignia as he waited for me to show up. I could tell he was just as nervous as I was about being in potentially hostile territory on our own " despite the fact that just a couple short months ago, he'd considered this his home.

I saw him visibly relax when I came into view.

"Oh, good," he said, licking his lips as he pushed himself off the side of the building. "You're back. Now we can leave."

I cocked an eyebrow at him. "Did something happen?"

"No, I just&#160;I don't want to get seen here by anybody I used to know. If they find out I've switched sides&#160;"

"Right." I let out a sigh. "Well, looks like we're both persona non grata here, kiddo. Let's get moving before the rebs decide they won't let us go quietly. Just walk normally."

We started off back in the direction of the Pelican, still several minutes out, weapons concealed or slung to show whoever might be watching that we had no intention of using them unless pressed. I figured both of us were resisting the urge to move toward our ride out as fast as possible, though I knew it wouldn't do in the face of the locals if it looked like we'd done something wrong; Hayden had told me they had enough gripes about the UNSC as it was, and I didn't want to add to their list. I just kept my eyes scanning the streets ahead as usual, which I didn't think anyone would find odd for a Marine officer of my rank. It was an instinct anyone who'd been in combat before would share.

Eventually Matthew spoke again.

"How did it go in there, Nat?" he asked.

"Not bad, but not as well as I'd hoped," I replied. Then I snorted. "I haven't dropped dead yet, so that's something." I ran a hand through my hair, feeling suddenly odd and naked without my helmet, also left behind in the bird. "But it looks like I'm not going to get the truce I wanted, and I can't afford to have us fighting on multiple fronts right now. We've already got the elusive Storm and Prometheans to deal with, and that's more than enough."

My brother-in-law screwed up his face. "Prometheans?"

"What we fought outside the ruins."

"Oh." He frowned. "I'm guessing that's not good."

"Nope." I glanced over at him and noticed that after the couple battles he'd fought in since I found him near Outpost Columbia, he seemed a little older than his nineteen years now. "By the way, make sure you keep what we saw down there to yourself. Don't talk about it with your brother, either. Will doesn't know about the portals yet."

Matthew looked confused. "I thought you told him everything."

"I do when it deals with us personally, but this is separate from that â€" and bigger. I can't help you knowing because you were there, but I'm trying to keep a tight lid on this knowledge for now. It'll come out soon enough. Till then, I made a command decision that it's need-to-know. That extends to my husband, too." I sighed a second time. "I can't be a good leader and play favorites, Matt. He already gets access to more than he should just because of the position I'm in. But this he'll have to find out at the same time everyone else does, for his own good."

"You know he's not going to like that," Matthew muttered.

"I know. But I don't want him to worry even more about me and you being on the ground, or how all this is going to pan out. It's the same reason I'm keeping this info from the rest of the unit, too."

"You think morale's going to take a dive."

I gave him a half-smile. "You're a sharp kid, Matt. Yeah. That's exactly what I want to avoid. Wouldn't you be scared if you knew your enemies were able to reinforce indefinitely at a moment's notice, right under your nose?"

The younger Hawk sighed. "Can I ask you something, Natalie?"

"Shoot."

"Are you scared?"

The pointblank question caught me off-guard, although I wasn't sure why. It was the natural progression for a kid as intuitive as Willis's baby brother. Another reason I thought he'd make a good addition to the Marines once we got back home and he could officially enlist, as he'd told me he hoped to do. For now, though, we were all stuck here on Khan.

"I haven't survived this long because I'm fearless, kiddo," I finally answered. "I'd be crazy if I said I could take the heat all the time and not feel a thing. I just know how to work with it. Fear can be good sometimes, keep you sharp and alert against your enemies â€" as long as you don't let it take over." I gripped the strap of my rifle harder as we walked. "My hope is that by the time word does get out,



we'll be in a better position where we won't have to worry so much about the implications. That's why I wanted our relationship with the locals established today, I want our new ship to get in, and I want to know exactly what's going on on the island before we make our move. If you're well prepared, things don't seem as impossible anymore." I gave him a look then and flashed him a small grin. "Chin up, Matt. Finding the ruins was only the beginning, kid."

\* \* \*

><p>The last time I'd felt a bullet whizz past my ear was probably never, given the fact that in the field, I almost always wore my helmet for protection. Out here, though, slightly dressed down for the meeting with Mayor Javier Laraza as a show of good faith, I was without the electronic systems and security afforded to me by my equipment. So when I felt and heard the displacement of the air right by head, it damn well startled me.<p>

But I also reacted fast.

"Watch it!" I yelled at Matthew as I suddenly barreled into his side and shoved him into a nearby alley. The kid stumbled a bit, caught off-guard by my quick action, and almost started to protest. But he soon realized what I was doing and quickly positioned himself beside me at the corner of the street, leaning against the building for cover and straining to see the shooter like I was. The shot had come from somewhere behind usâ€|and I was pretty sure I knew who it might be.

"Where are they?" the younger Hawk asked, looking just over my shoulder. "I don't see anybody."

I was already aiming down my rifle's sights, DMR in hand. "They're there. Keep your eyes open."

I went into a crouch then so Matthew could have a better vantage point as he brought his pistol up while he stood, and I could make myself a smaller target as I inched over closer to the exposed street. Another shot rang out and a bullet bit into the side of the brick and mortar structure, puffs of rock bursting into the air close to my face. I shut my eyes tight and glanced away, then pulled on my sunglasses to compensate.

It was still fairly early in the morning, so my view with the glasses was dark, but it did the job of keeping my eyes clear of debris. Besides, the sun was just a few minutes from breaking over the horizon now anyway. \_Another beautiful day in fucking paradise,\_ I thought to myself.

Standing above me, I could almost sense my brother-in-law's apprehension, so I said, "Matt, don't worry about taking a shot back. I packed both guns with non-lethals on the ride out from Qamar. You won't kill anyone."

I took my own advice then and fired off a quick burst in the direction of the shots, if nothing else than to make the shooter jumpy and keep the bastard on his toes. I knew it wasn't a skilled sniper as the one who'd drilled me twice through the back about a month ago, because if that were the case we'd both already be dead. Regardless, I'd been shot by Jackals that time, not human rebels â€"

although they had been working together. I kept my aim steady and waited for the shooter to mess up and show himself.

Luck finally came our way when I saw something move in the distance, out from behind a building same as we were. It seemed Matthew saw him at the same time, because he fired off four rounds from my sidearm and sent the man scurrying back behind cover. I tapped on my brother-in-law's leg to get his attention.

"Now's our chance, Matt," I said to him, gesturing to the other side of the street. "Let's move and see if we can't nail this guy."

I got up on my haunches and took a second to check the street again, then, staying crouched, bolted for the stone column on the opposite side. I was about a third of the way there when I felt something tear harshly into my left arm. I winced and let out a rough growl, momentarily slowing, but kept running till I was safely behind cover again.

Matthew was hot on my heels, his deep brown eyes suddenly wide as he came to a halt and dropped beside me.

"Jesus, Nat. You're bleeding."

I gritted my teeth against the pain and waved my good hand at him dismissively. "We need to get this shooter out of the picture first. Don't worry about it."

"Okay."

Willis's little brother got up again from our new cover and tried to track the shooter. It pissed me off to no end that it took only one to get us into this position, but without the aid of electronics, it was a mess trying to search for him in the still-dark early morning streets from far away. I clamped my hand for a moment over my gushing wound, where the bullet had grazed me, then took a deep breath and let go. It was time to finish this.

Bringing my DMR to bear once more, I zoomed in with the scope and pressed my face close to the weapon. I checked up and down the streets ahead of us, knowing for sure that our target had moved by now, and then I spotted him again. Rattling off a rapid burst, I followed it up quickly with three more for good measure, hoping my rounds found purchase.

I was rewarded with the sound of a pained shout and watched through the scope as the target finally fell to the ground. I didn't even feel bad this time about firing at a fellow human being; he'd tried to kill me first, and I wasn't the one packing lethal heat. I knew the man was safely down and unable to hurt us, but not dead.

To that end, I turned to Matthew fast, tugging on his shoulder with my good hand. "Matt, we need to get back to that Pelican, now. That might not've been the only one they sent after us."

Much to my surprise, instead of moving right away, Matthew just stood there for a minute longer, staring off in the direction of the incapacitated and moaning figure several tens of meters in front of us.

"Natalieâ€|that shooter wasn't a guy. Did you hear her scream?"

Truth be told, I hadn't noticed in the moment. But as I looked out at the downed figure in the distance again, I remembered that she'd sounded different.

"So it wasn't Laraza," I murmured.

That left me perplexed for a moment, but not long enough to stick around. I pulled on my brother-in-law's uniform collar to get him going, and we jogged the rest of the way to the Pelican, weapons in hand all the way this time till we arrived at the spot.

Using my good arm, I banged hard on the back hatch and yelled at Captain Heat in lieu of a radio hail. "Heat, open up! It's us! We need to bug out!"

"Got it, Colonel!" came the reply from the cockpit.

It was as we were loading up into the troop bay with the Pelican already lifting off that the pain suddenly hit me even harder. I winced again in my seat and gripped my bleeding bicep with my right hand, trying to stem the blood flow. I wanted to pull off my uniform jacket to check out the damage, but knew I probably shouldn't till we were on the island again and I could go see Doc. In the meantime, I started to sweat from the effort of keeping the pain to myself, and Matthew glanced over at me with an increasingly worried look.

"Natalie? Are you sure you're okay?" he asked me.

"Yeah, kid," I said through gritted teeth. "I'll beâ€|fine. I've hadâ€|much worse than this before."

To keep my mind occupied and off the pain during the flight, I thought again of the woman I'd shot in the street just now. I knew without a doubt she'd been a rebel, otherwise she would've had no reason to rattle off a series of rounds at a UNSC Marine and her escort.

I also knew that even if it hadn't been Mayor Laraza personally who'd been after me, it was a damn good bet that he'd been the one to send the rebel on her errand.

## 10. Chapter 9: Ominous Signs and Hard Times

### **\*\*Chapter Nine: Ominous Signs and Hard Times\*\***

"I knew I'd see you in here again before long, Colonel."

Once we made it back to the island, Matthew and Heat were quick to escort me to the makeshift medtent set up within the 8th Engineer Battalion's lines. I'd protested that I didn't need the help, that I'd injured my arm and not one of my legs and could still walk, but that hadn't helped my case much. Heat insisted he had to see me to a medic or face the wrath of Willis if he brought back his wife harmed. Matthew was just straight-up worried about me. So they waited outside the tent now while Corpsman Michael Reynolds tended to my wound.

I snorted at his words. "Yeah. God forbid I leave the house without a bandage, right?" I winced as something the medic dabbed onto my arm sent pain spiraling upward to my shoulder. "Maybeâ€|Porter's right to keep such a close eye on me all the time."

Doc Reynolds briefly grinned as he finished cleaning up the wound, his blue eyes bright. "That he is, ma'am. He knows you as well as I do by now. We've both been under your command for a long time."

He bandaged up the injury then, threw away the sterile cloths he'd used to clean my arm with, now bloody, then tossed in his gloves as well. Finally, he released a sigh as he ran a hand through his cropped black hair.

"Well, that's it from me, Colonel. You can put your uniform jacket and armor back on now. If you need something for the pain later, let me know. If not, try to be back tomorrow morning and I'll switch out the bandages for you. It should heal up just fine."

"Okay," I said. I raised an eyebrow at him. "You're sure nothing you gave me just now isâ€|going to interfere with what I'm already taking?"

"No, ma'am. You're all clear this time. Promise."

"All right. Thanks, Doc."

"Anytime, ma'am." He gave me a pointed look. "You're lucky that bullet just grazed you, though. Try to be more careful next time."

"I know," I answered glumly. "I'm sure my husband isn't going to be too happy with me."

Reynolds made a coughing sound as he took a quick glance outside the tent then. "Uh-oh. Don't look now."

"He's here?" I asked, surprised.

"Yup." The medic flashed me another grin. "Good luck, Colonel."

Then Reynolds was gone and Willis appeared inside the tent, all concern.

"Natalie, what happened? Are you okay?"

I didn't put my jacket back on over my T-shirt just yet, but sat there holding onto my bandaged wound instead. It still hurt. "Well, like I told your brother, Will. I've had worse. Bullet just grazed me, nothing too bad." I winced a second time. "Hurts like a son of a bitch, though."

Willis frowned as he stood in front of the cot I was sitting on, dressed in his flightsuit and gripping his helmet in one hand. His eyes drifted over to my jacket, draped over the other half of the cot where I wasn't seated, and he saw the hole the bullet had ripped into the left sleeve. Then he turned back to me.

"I told you to be careful when you went over there, honey."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. I made a dumb mistake."

My husband let out a sigh then and crouched down before me to press his forehead against mine. "I hate seeing you like this, Coop."

I let my good arm move up to touch the side of his short hair. "It's bound to happen at times, Will. You know it comes with the job."

"Yeah, but it happens \_a lot\_ with you. Remember what I said when we went to go look for my brother at the outpost? About you trying to take it easy?"

"Yeah."

He pulled back a bit to look into my eyes as he slid a hand across my cheek. "Then please do, Cooper."

Now that we were alone, he pressed his lips gently against mine, and I kissed him back without a second thought. Even the harsh pain of my wound seemed to dull for a moment. But all too soon, we were thrust back into reality — in a very big way.

An explosion suddenly rocked the ground hard outside the tent, sending Willis tumbling into me on the cot. I let out a harsh hiss through my teeth as my hurt arm took the brunt of it and instinctively grabbed hold of the bandaged wound. Willis got up as soon as the ground stopped shaking and quickly gave me an apologetic look.

"Christ, Natalie, I'm sorry. Is it bad?"

"A little," I said through clenched teeth. "But I'm — more concerned about what the hell that was."

"I'll go take a look."

"No. Not by yourself. Wait for me."

Willis turned back and waggled his eyebrows at me. "Is that an order?"

I shoved playfully at his chest, unable to help the slight smile that formed on my face despite the situation — and the pain. "I can make it one if you choose to ignore it. Help me up."

My husband extended his hand at me and I took it. He pulled me up to my feet, then handed me my jacket to put on.

"Better hurry, Colonel," he said.

I snorted. "Yeah. Thanks, honey."

I finished putting on my jacket over my T-shirt fast, then quickly strapped my torso armor back on. Beside me, I saw Willis do the same over his flightsuit. It seemed he'd chosen to stay groundside for this engagement now that he was already here.

"No time to fly back up," he explained to me as he shoved on his

helmet. "Besides, I'd like to see our new enemy from up close. And make sure you're safe."

I nodded as I put on my own helmet. "Fair enough. Let's move then, Major."

We stepped out of the tent with weapons raised, unsure of what we'd find. Willis was gripping his SMG tight in his hands, while I had both my DMR and my pistol back since Matthew had reclaimed his MA5D on the return trip. Still, walking out into the chaos "even fully armed" was jarring.

Case in point was the enemy grenade that went sailing over our heads.

My husband and I both hit the deck in an instant and covered our heads, fully expecting another detonation to engulf us and shower our position with shards of hot metal. But it turned out the Prometheans' device didn't do that. Instead, I watched as a ring of yellow-orange light encircled the explosive as it was suspended in the air, and then the light suddenly burst inward.

When we rose carefully to our feet, I was faintly surprised to find we were both still intact. I was puzzled for a moment until it hit me. I glanced over at Willis.

"EMP charge?" he asked me, clearly having the same idea.

I shrugged. "Makes sense for robots, right?"

"Yep. Looks like my helmet's systems are rebooting."

"Mine, too."

"There you go, then, Coop."

"Will! Natalie! Over here!"

The shout came from our right, and we both turned at the same time. Several meters ahead of us on our flank were Matthew, Heat, and Staff Sergeant Porter and his squad, ready to cover me. I grinned momentarily at our good fortune and sprinted over to their position.

As we moved, I heard a male voice flood the COM channel. It was a hail to Willis from one of his pilots.

"Major Hawk, this is Earwig!" the voice said, no doubt using his callsign. "We just saw those new robot things show up! Orders, sir?"

Willis keyed his COM back fast. "Form up tight and stay close overhead!" my husband answered as we ran. "I'm stuck on the ground for now along with Captain Heat, and it looks like the Prometheans've managed to penetrate our lines again. I don't see an opening for you to provide cover fire where you won't also hit us, so just standby and watch our six for now, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir!"

By the time we reached the others, my bandaged left arm was throbbing from holding up the weight of my DMR. I tried my best to block it out and focused instead on the task at hand â€" finding out what the hell was going on, and how the Prometheans had managed to bypass our perimeter again without warning.

"Okay," I said over the sound of weapons' fire and the battle going on all around us. "Who can tell me what the fuck just happened? Where did these bastards come from?"

Matthew Hawk was the first to reply. "No clue, Nat! One second we were standing there waiting for you to come out, next we heard an explosion and they were on us!"

"Shit," I muttered under my breath. I motioned for my aide to cover me then as I got on the horn to Major Shawn Harris, the 8th Engineers' new battalion commander in my stead. "Shawn, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. Want to fill me in on the situation?"

There was a brief delay before I heard his answer over the radio. "Yes, ma'am! I just spoke with the Marines you had posted outside the ruins, Colonel. They said there wasn't a hint of activity and then, all of a sudden, a bunch of those AI motherfuckers jumped out. They leapt over the men posted there and sort ofâ€|\_teleported\_ behind our lines, ma'am."

"Jesus," I breathed. "All right, got it, Harris."

"Orders, ma'am?"

"Yeah," I said, gripping my DMR tighter. "Let's drive these bastards out."

I cut the connection then and swore under my breath a second time. Willis glanced over at me with raised eyebrows.

"What?"

"They came from out of the ruins," I replied.

"Huh? How â€" ?"

But I didn't have time to respond right now. I got moving then with Staff Sergeant Porter hot on my heels and jumped into the fray, making sure I turned some robots into sparking scrap metal in the fight, too.

"Let's go, Marines!" I yelled to the scattered men around me. "Pick up the fire! We need to clear the perimeter, \_now\_! Push them back!"

The sounds of battle only grew louder then as machine guns barked to life along the lines, and the combined noise of rifles, shotguns, and SMGs suddenly increased. A few frag grenades went sailing toward the center as well, where the highest concentration of Prometheans were, and they managed to blow up two dogs, a Knight, and three drones in the big blast. Meanwhile, my teeth rattled inside my helmet at the close explosion as debris bounced off my armor, but thankfully nothing serious hit me or my companions. As soon as the smoke

cleared, I went down on one knee where I stood and fired off a quick burst from my DMR.

Remembering what I'd learned from our previous two encounters with these guys â€" though brief â€" I systematically targeted the drones first while Staff Sergeant Porter took out the Crawlers gunning for us with his SAW. In the meantime, the others concentrated their fire on the Knights at my command. It was a good tactic that served us well â€" especially when Willis and Matt both crouched down beside me and added their bullets to the cause, too.

My clip was spent after I shot down a fifth drone out of the sky, its center suddenly exploding into a light rain of sparks and metal above its Knight. I noticed then that the occasional shield of light that popped up around the tall AI-bot fizzled out then, while the thing's secondary drone raced to cover it again. I turned to Willis as I reloaded.

"Will, the drone!" I shouted.

"On it!" my husband replied.

He stood up for a moment amid the hail of gunfire and light rounds and brought his SMG up, then fired off a long burst that brought the second Watcher crashing down from above beside its twin. At last exposed, the Knight let out another spray of fire itself, then teleported out.

"\_Fuck\_" I heard Porter shout nearby. "I had him!"

"It's okay, Josh," I said to him over the COM. "It'll show up again. Marines, keep your eyes peeled!"

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUDâ€|

â€|And then the Knight suddenly reappeared right in front of us, hollow eyes blazing with light, and something that looked an awful lot like a purple light blade was in its hands.

The Knight was suddenly standing just before Willis.

"\_No\_" I screamed, and without even thinking about it, I ditched my gun and lunged.

I hadn't seen Matthew do the same beside me but he did, and together we went crashing into the robot. A few bullets bounced off its chestplate, luckily missing both my brother-in-law and I, and we brought the Promethean down. The thing struggled against our surprise attack and the lead rounds, its blade still out, and it swept out its arm once, hoping to catch us and slice us in half. It didn't.

Dubious as to whether or not my combat knife would work against this guy, I brought my pistol out instead, lightning quick, and shot round after round pointblank into its son-of-a-bitch face until sparks flew.

One more long burst of fire did it.

I didn't notice that Staff Sergeant Porter had come up beside the



thing's head until it was dead. The Knight hadn't even finished dropping to the ground when it disintegrated into a thousand light fragments, as they'd done before, and disappeared. When we could see again, only its weapon remained.

I sat there on the ground in a kind of daze, breathing hard along with Matthew and Porter. I didn't even notice the sharp ache of my wound until Willis ran up in front of us.

"Holy shit," he said, his hazel eyes wide with astonishment and worry. "Jesus, Cooper. Matt, you okay?"

"Yeah, big bro," Matthew replied as he started to get up, albeit slowly. "I'mâ€¦good to go."

"Natalie?"

I winced for the third time since landing back on the island. "Yeah, Will. I'm notâ€¦dead quite yet."

Seeing that we were more or less fine, my husband's face went from panicked alarm to deep anger in a second. "\_Never\_ do that again. Either of you. Understand?" His expression abruptly softened and he looked down at his boots. "I couldn't handle it if something happened to my family because of me."

"Sameâ€¦here," I said from the dirt. My eyes suddenly stung, and I wiped at them with my sleeve. "That Knightâ€¦he was gunning for you, Willis. I thought he was going to stab you. It freaked me out."

Willis knelt down in front of me and cupped a hand around the back of my helmet. He was smiling faintly now, but I could still see the hurt in his eyes.

"Even so, you're crazy, Cooper. But I love you."

"I love you, too," I answered.

Again he held out his hand for me, and I grabbed onto it. Once I was back on my feet, I put my sidearm away and searched for my discarded rifle, holding onto my bandaged arm as I did so to will the pain away. It didn't work, but I found my DMR among the debris and picked it up.

It was only when I brought my weapon to bear again that I realized that the fight was suddenly over. I glanced at Willis.

"Whereâ€¦?"

"Don't know. The rest of them were either killed or bugged out," he said. Then he gave me a questioning look of his own. "Want to tell me what you meant earlier?"

I screwed up my face, drawing a blank. All the adrenaline of the past several minutes had taken it out of me. "About what?"

"About them being from the ruins." Now that the danger had passed, my husband let out a sigh as he cradled his submachine in his hands,

barrel pointed low. "Something's down there, isn't it, Coop?"

I sighed too as I remembered. The gig was up. "Yeah. We found a large chamber down there, a roomful of portals." I looked out into the distance, at the after-effects of the fight, unable to meet his gaze. "And we have no idea how many there might be, which are active, or where they might go. Or what we can do to button them back up."

## 11. Chapter 10: Specs

### \*\*Chapter Ten: Specs\*\*

Willis had his jaw set as we walked quietly toward the rendezvous coordinates I'd just set up. I didn't need our near-eleven years of marriage to tell he was upset. Still, I said nothing myself, and waited for him to speak first while we strode through the 8th Engineers' reestablished lines.

Finally, when we'd almost reached the spot, he turned to me and came to a halt. His eyes were calm but searching as he looked at me. Maybe he was giving me the benefit of the doubt since I'd just saved his life.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner, Coop?"

"I couldn't, Will."

"Why not?" he pressed.

I released a sigh, trying hard not to sound brusque but failing. "Because it doesn't concern you."

"Doesn't concern me?" he repeated incredulously. "My brother and \_my wife\_ are on the ground waiting to get shot like fish in a barrel, and that 'doesn't concern me'?"

"I meant your command, Willis. It wasn't something you and your pilots needed to know about to do your jobs. Not yet. And we're hardly fish in a barrel. I've got two Marine battalions dirtside and a third in reserve coming in on the new ship. Plus two Scorpion tanks, three Warthogs still functional, and both your squadrons in the air to provide overhead support. We're not exactly in bad shape ourselves here."

My husband frowned. "Maybe, but those portals â€" "

"I know, and I'm working on it, like I said. That's also what this briefing's about. I've got some ideas and plans already in the works. This is just to get some input and make sure everyone's on the same page about this."

It was Willis's turn to sigh now. "How many others know?"

"A handful. Not a lot. Majors Harris and Warfield, the spook, Captain Rhodes on the \_Affair\_, and the small team of Marines that went down into the ruins with me. Basically just my aide and â€" "

"And my brother," Willis replied, his voice going hard again. "My

little brother knows and I'm guessing you probably told him not to tell me."

I glanced down at the dirt, put my hands on my hips, then met his gaze again. "I wish you'd understand that this isn't about you, Willis. It has nothing to do with me and you personally and everything to do with where we're at professionally. I can't help that Matthew was with me when we went in. But I can assure you that outside of that this stuff is known only at the very top. And my senior staff had to know because otherwise they can't effectively lead the ground units. Captain Rhodes told me things even the spook wasn't privy to when I got promoted, Will. It comes with the job. I can't always tell you every single thing I know just because you're my husband. Because everything's up to me now, and I just â€"

Surprising me, I felt my husband's arms suddenly surround me in a tight hug. Slowly, I hugged him back, the action made awkward thanks to our bulky gear, but no less welcome. I grabbed onto the back of his armor hard and rested my chin on his shoulder for a moment, giving in completely to the embrace. I was so relieved he understood that I felt like a literal weight had lifted off my shoulders.

"It's okay, Cooper," he finally said, his arms still wrapped around my middle. He blew out a breath. "I'm sorry about getting mad at you. I know it's not your fault. I know you didn't ask for all this responsibility. And I know you still miss your best friend, and you're only doing what you think is fair. I...can respect that."

"Will â€"

He pulled back and took my face in both his hands now that I was without a helmet, gently, and gave me a small smile. "I made the mistake of being selfish before and you ended up close to death in Columbia's medical wing. I won't make it again. I trust you, Natalie. Whatever you decide, you know I've got your back."

I couldn't help the answering grin that spread across my face at his words. There was only one thing I could think of to say in reply. "You're amazing, honey."

"Thanks. I try," Willis said, his own grin widening. Then he quirked an eyebrow at me. "Now I think we've got a briefing to attend, Colonel."

\* \* \*

><p>The meeting was a solemn affair, held deep within the 904th Infantry Battalion's lines well away from where we'd encountered the Storm earlier in the day, as well as the ruins guarded by the 8th Engineers. Both of the 904th's Warthogs surrounded us, while Willis's Victor Squadron circled overhead - though not conspicuously so. Even though we were technically out in the open, heading up to the ship right now was out of the question, and this was as safe a place as we could make it.<p>

I slung my rifle behind me then and folded my arms across my chest as each of the four officers present nodded to me in turn - Major Harris, Major Warfield, Willis, and the spook.

"All right," I said, starting things off. I nodded to my husband. "I brought our air commander in on this now, too. Obviously the ruins pose a problem, and our lines still aren't safe despite the heavily armed perimeters and patrols. And somehow we've got to make all this secure by the time our new ship arrives in four days." I looked over at Warfield. "Major, any updates from Captain Sogaard's company? Are they finished with the mapping yet?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered gruffly, as usual. "Captain Sogaard and her Marines got back just before the Prometheans attacked the Eighth's lines."

"And?" I prompted.

"The tunnel they found on the beach led straight to the main chamber of the ruins."

I nodded at the news. "That's what we figured. So we know how the Remnant troops are keeping out of sight and launching surprise attacks against our lines." I looked at the map of the island on my datapad, focusing on the thin orange line that denoted where Sogaard's Marines had found a link to the ruins underground. "If there's one path, though, there's gotta be more."

"That poses a problem for our mission, ma'am," Major Harris said then. "Without knowing how many of these underground passages there might be, we can't effectively secure the ruins for the scientists when they arrive in the new ship."

"And we can't know how many passages there are until they come down to scope it out for us," I said, thoughtful. "That's a hell of a catch-22."

Willis spoke up beside me. "There's also the Prometheans to consider, ma'am. They've been jumping our lines too from what I just saw."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and again wished that Hayden was here to add his more experienced voice. But like Lloyd had said earlier, he wasn't, and so it was up to me to find a solution to our bevy of issues. I let out a sigh as I lowered my hand from my face.

"Well, there's no other way around this. Four days isn't enough to search the whole damn island for more shortcuts. We're just going to have to double our watch and make sure the men realize that no perimeter is impenetrable. I think we've been taught that lesson a couple times now." I looked at Warfield and Harris in turn. "Majors, I want you to upload a copy of this map to each of your company commanders. Make sure they know exactly where this place is, and that they're aware that the Storm or Prometheans can emerge from it at any time. Obviously, you'll want to avoid placing your perimeter in its direct proximity."

"Yes, ma'am," Harris replied.

"Understood, Colonel," Warfield said.

I glanced over at the ONI operative next. "Lloyd, I want you to take one of the engineer companies and start surveying all you can down on the beach. Mark every cave and outcrop around that you can get to

within the next few days, and we'll start from there. Assume that each location is hostile, but don't try to go inside for now. I just want to get a better idea of how many there might be, and where they're positioned."

"Got it, Colonel," the spook responded. He scratched the back of his neck. "What about the portals though, ma'am? How do you want the ruins secured for the scientists?"

"We'll do what we can to make it as safe as possible for them. Post a tight guard both in the chamber and on the outside. I may have to bring this to Captain Rhodes aboard the Affair for approval." I shifted my stance. "But as long as there's no active combat going on, I'd say we bring them in regardless. We can't solve this on our own without their help, and they knew what they were getting themselves into when they signed up."

"We'll just have to make sure the Marines are prepared for any contingency, then," Warfield murmured.

Harris overheard and snorted good-naturedly at the other major. "We're Marines, Cole. Always supposed to be ready for that."

Major Warfield cracked a rare smile. "Oorah, brother."

"Okay. I know we're far from an ideal situation at the moment, but I hope that getting some things in motion before our reinforcements arrive will give us an edge," I said. "Beyond that, we just have to hold the lines for a few more days till we get some definitive answers. And by then, we'll also have a fresh battalion at our disposal as well. I can see about rotating one of the units out for a break if it looks like things stay relatively quiet. If things are hot, however, we'll just go ahead and bring in the extra battalion right away." I looked at the other officers around me. "Questions so far?"

No one said anything.

"Good. Shawn, your battalion is closest to the ruins, so make sure you keep round-the-clock surveillance on that area. Until we map this place out, remember that our enemies have access to come and go as they please. We'll try to remedy that with some small recon drones of our own that Major Hawk here can requisition from the Affair. At least if they go dark, you'll know instantly that trouble's coming."

Harris nodded. "That'll work, ma'am."

"Will, I need your squadrons to enlarge the radius of their flights," I said to my husband. "I know it's a lot of ground to cover, but if you guys can spot enemy forces coming out of the woodwork where we can't and give us a head's up, that would help a lot. In this case, I'll need your pilots to start observing the shores as well as the ridge and the ruins."

"Consider it done, Colonel."

"Hopefully that should tide us over until the scientists can land and get us more intel," I said. "In the meantime, I'll keep working on the locals. This morning's contact was clearly a bust, but I believe

as soon as the mayor comes to understand the gravity of the situation, I can get him on board." Ignoring the pain of my wounded arm, which I had no doubt he'd indirectly inflicted, I added, "Besides having the rebs pacified, once our reinforcements arrive, I'd like to use the mainland as a staging area where we can hold extra troops and supplies in reserve, so we don't have to sacrifice part of our air cover for too long going back and forth to the \_Affair\_. If we can do so without having to constantly watch our six, all the better."

I glanced up again and looked at the pensive faces around me. Once again, Warfield was the only one who seemed more stern than contemplative. Something was still amiss with the newest major, and I decided then that I'd try to catch him after the briefing and finally figure out what was going on.

"If anyone has any other ideas or suggestions to add, now's the time," I prompted.

Again the officers around me remained silent. I waited about a minute before I said, "All right, then. That's all I've got for you. Obviously if things change, we'll meet here again to devise a new solution. For now, though, you've got your orders. Dismissed."

I wanted to speak to Major Warfield in private now, but I knew I had to talk to Lieutenant Lloyd first before he left. I motioned for the spook to stay put and pulled him aside.

"Cal, one more thing for you," I said to him. I handed him a small data chip. "This is my helmet cam feed from the skirmish we just fought on the other side of the ridge. I know the admiral will want a complete report from me later, but I'm giving this to you now to send up to Captain Rhodes. It's got my notes on some tactics I noticed the Prometheans using in the fight, and a guess on the type of grenades they deploy. Might be helpful."

The Navy lieutenant nodded. "Sure thing, Colonel. I'll get this sent right away."

"Thanks."

When I turned to leave, I found Willis waiting for me. The others had already moved off.

"Sounds like you've got your work cut out for you, Cooper."

I gave him a look. "If only you knew, Will." I ran a hand across my face, already feeling exhausted from the day's events - not to mention hurt and sore. "What I wouldn't give to be back home right now."

"I know, honey. Me, too. But for now, this is our lot. Gotta make the most of it." He looked around, knowing the other officers were still nearby, and grabbed hold of my hand and squeezed in lieu of a kiss. "I'm going to go meet up with Heat now and head back up. Hang in there, Natalie."

"Yeah, thanks."

And just like that, Willis was gone.

When I finally left myself and went to look for Major Warfield, he was nowhere to be found.

## 12. Chapter 11: Getting Up to Speed

**\*\*Chapter Eleven: Getting Up to Speed\*\***

**\*\*Undetermined Shipboard Time, February 15, 2558. Onboard UNSC Transport Ship \*\*\_\*\*Suave Affair\*\*\_\*\*, In Orbit Above Planet Khan. "The Newest Compatriots," Outer Colonies. Prologue to the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\***

Five days later Willis and I found ourselves aboard the Suave Affair waiting for the new UNSC ship, the Excalibur, to come in. It was a day late, much to our chagrin, so we hadn't been able to spend Valentine's Day on the ship together. My husband had promised me that if we got the chance, though, he'd make it up to me today. It was the fourteenth one we'd spent together, so some sort of mark of the occasion was in order.

As for more serious matters, things groundside had thankfully been quieter as of late. When Willis and I had left the island a couple of hours ago, we'd gone a solid three days with no attacks. I hoped that would hold up when we finally escorted the scientists down, too.

Presently, we were both seated in the mess hall grabbing a quick bite to eat. It was a nice change of pace from the energy bars and, when we were lucky and had enough time, MREs that we lived off of dirtside on the surface of Khan. Officially I was here to be the welcome wagon for the new ship, and to bring the major in charge of the extra Marine contingent up to speed on groundside operations. Willis, as always, had been my ride up.

He picked at his second tray of food now, either preoccupied or stuffed. I was still working on my first.

"What's up?" I asked him around a mouthful of chicken, rice, and peas. It wasn't anything fancy, but it tasted a hell of a lot better than cardboard-flavored bars. "You look like something you just ate was bad."

My husband ran a hand over his week-old beard. "No. It's not the food."

"Then what?"

"I checked my personal messages when we got onboard, Cooper. My parents sent me one. It's about the kids."

A sharp twinge of dread went through me then. I opened my mouth to speak but found I couldn't, suddenly paralyzed with worry. Willis must've seen the look on my face and was quick to reassure me.

"Don't worry, Natalie. They're fine. It's justâ€¦that message hit me harder than I thought. I really miss them."

I slid a hand across the table discreetly, and he took it with his own. "I do, too, Will."

"My mom saidâ€|she said Liam's taking our absence the hardest. Apparently he was okay for a while in the beginning, but now he cries some nights before he goes to sleep. Mostly for you."

It was soul-crushing to hear that. I dropped my fork after a minute, all interest in my meal lost, and pushed my tray away to put my head in my hands.

"Jesus, Will. Our poor kid."

"I know. I feel bad, too."

I felt like shit myself now, wishing I could be back on Mars to comfort my youngest son and tell him it was all okay, that we'd be home soon. Though Liam was older than Olivia by three minutes, he'd always been the baby of the family since he was generally a quiet, shy little guy, and a bit smaller physically than his twin sister. I'd worried about leaving all my kids behind when we'd left, but I'd worried about Liam the most. Hearing that my fears were well-founded hurt.

"What about Liv and Gabe?" I asked.

"They're doing better. Liv misses us but she's a trooper, just like her mom," he said with a small smile, "and Gabriel's turning out to be the protective type. My parents say he's taking good care of the twins, especially Liam when he gets upset." He squeezed my hand. "We made a good set of kids, Coop."

I smiled a little. "Yeah. We did."

Slowly the hurt was replaced by relief. I felt proud of my firstborn for taking charge in our absence and watching over his younger siblings, insofar as he could at his age. Sometimes, because of what he'd been through as an infant and a toddler during the War, he seemed more mature than his seven years. Still, all the talk made me miss the three of them even more.

"So what else is on tap?" I questioned, hoping to change the subject so I didn't start tearing up in public. I checked my watch. "The ship's not due for another twenty minutes, so we've got some time."

Willis surprised me by releasing a sigh. He lowered his voice and said, "I went down to the medbay aboard ship when we landed while you went to go talk to Captain Rhodes, to ask about the meds you take for the nightmares. The \_Affair\_'s all out, Cooper. The doc over there said we should try the \_Excalibur\_ when it gets in."

"Shit." This wasn't good. Without my pills against the nightmares, they'd slowly start coming back. Eventually, I'd become more of a liability than a leader without their calming effect â€" I either wouldn't sleep at all, or it'd be restless in the extreme.

Willis saw my expression and said, "It'll be okay, honey. I'm sure the \_Excalibur\_'s got more on board. Don't sweat it."



"Will you remember what I was like without them. During the war and when it was over, before I got pregnant with the twins I was a fucking mess."

"I know. But it won't happen again, Coop. You said yourself the new ship's coming in with lots of supplies. You'll be fine."

It was my turn to let out a sigh this time. Because right now, the immense weight of the responsibility on my shoulders seemed heavier than ever to bear.

\* \* \*

><p>Though Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd had detached himself from our company once we'd landed on the <em>Affair</em>, he met back up with me now as we strode down the hall to meet with the top ground officer aboard the Excalibur. I assumed Willis had either gone to our quarters or was off to attend to other matters while he waited for the meet and greet to be over. As for me, I tried my best not to preoccupy myself with thoughts of being without the meds I needed, and concentrated instead on the task at hand. Sort of.

"Still playing solitaire, Lieutenant?" I asked the spook as we walked.

The Naval officer just grinned. "Yes, ma'am. Why?"

"Last time I found you in the rec room on our trip up, you were playing with a deck of real cards. It's been a long time since I've seen anybody do that."

"Holdover from ONI training, Colonel," Lloyd replied.

I raised an eyebrow. "How so? Or are you even allowed to tell me?"

"No, I can tell you that much. It's nothing top secret." We rounded a corner then, and he continued, "Basically we have a period of about two weeks during training where we go completely dark. No helmet electronics, no datapad, nothing. It's to teach us how to survive in case our gear goes out, or in case the mission requires that we leave no electronic signature. I know that each branch of the UNSC military does something similar with their own recruits, too."

I nodded. "I remember us doing something like that during my first year at the Naval Academy. Our instructors told us it's even more intensive for us officers than the enlisted personnel because we rely so much more on our tech to keep things organized."

"That's right, ma'am. So you can only imagine how much more intense it was for me as a spook."

I smirked at him. "Yep. So intense you picked up card-playing?"

Lieutenant Lloyd laughed. "To be fair, that was mostly because we got bored at times without our devices."

"I bet. Intel's all about the gadgets from what I hear."

"There's a little more to it than that, Colonel, but I'm not about to reveal trade secrets."

We reached the starboard hangar bay then and waited as the Pelican disembarked a few military personnel and some gear. I couldn't tell from this distance which one was the major we were supposed to introduce ourselves to. The answer came soon enough, though, as a woman with short red hair in a pixie cut and a fresh battledress uniform strode towards us. She came to attention and saluted when she saw me.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, ma'am. Major Danielle Brewer reporting as ordered."

I saluted back. "At ease, Major. So you're our new battalion commander?"

"Yes, ma'am. Straight from the Inner Colonies, Colonel."

"So I gathered. What can you tell us about your ship's complement, Danielle?"

Major Brewer seemed uncomfortable for a moment. "It's Dani, ma'am. I stick to my full name only on official papers and introductions."

"Dani, then."

Brewer nodded. "Our transport ship's not much, ma'am. Definitely not as large as the Affair. Small structure, relatively small complement, but she's laden with supplies." The major suddenly smirked. "She's even got a couple of those new Mantis machines on board, Colonel. I can't wait to use those big beasts dirtside."

I grinned, too. "Sounds great so far."

"Other than that, though, it's just me, my Marine battalion, the ship's crew â€" "

"What about the civilian team, Major?" I asked, cutting her off. I didn't want to get lost in the details, just an overview.

"Eight of the UNSC's best minds, ma'am. Besides those already occupied with other tasks, of course." She looked at Lieutenant Lloyd then, and I noticed her gaze lingered. With his short, dark brown hair and piercing blue eyes, the young ONI operative was a very attractive man. "We have another spook onboard, too."

That momentarily threw me for a loop; either Captain Rhodes hadn't known that beforehand, or he'd decided not to mention it to me.

"Really?"

"Yes, ma'am," Major Brewer responded. "Should be coming by soon." She folded her arms across her chest then. "I was told we'd get a preview of how things are going down on Khan."

"That's correct, Major. You'll get the full brief I gave my other battalion commanders on your datapad. I just sent it before you got

here. Hopefully some intel's already made its way toward you while you guys were en route."

"Affirmative, ma'am. We know the locals have been testy and that the Storm are here. We also know you found Prometheans on the surface recently by some old ruins, and what they are. That's about it, though."

I smiled faintly. "Unfortunately that's pretty much all we know about the Prometheans, too. But Lieutenant Lloyd here's trying to expand our knowledge base ahead of the civvies coming down to scope things out for us over there."

Brewer nodded again. "Anything else I should know, Colonel?"

I shifted my stance, trying to recall the mental list of things I'd prepared to tell the newly arrived battalion commander. "The lines have actually been quiet the past few days, which I hope will continue so we can bring the scientists down to the surface right away." I frowned. "Probably the strangest thing I can think of so far is that there's been no all-out assault from either the Prometheans or the Storm, our initial landing notwithstanding. They've mostly just been harassing my other two battalions on occasion, keeping the men on their toes."

"Interesting. So either they don't have the manpower or the means, or they've been holding back for something."

"Exactly. That's something we'll continue to keep an eye on and investigate, with Lloyd's help."

"And mine."

Much to my surprise, the new voice was a familiar one, also female. I looked past Major Dani Brewer then and saw another woman walking toward us, blonde hair put up for duty like mine and contrasting sharply with her black ONI fatigues.

For a moment I was thrown off-guard again. I'd never known she was a spook.

The newcomer halted in front of me then, as Brewer had done, and saluted.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. Lieutenant Commander Courtney Hayden reporting as ordered, ma'am."

### 13. Chapter 12: Connections

#### **\*\*Chapter Twelve: Connections\*\***

I didn't even know what to say when I was faced with Hayden's wife in front of me. I had no idea if she'd already heard the news or not — and if she hadn't, I really hated to have to be the one to tell her. Instead I stood there awkwardly for a moment before I reverted back to formalities, returning her salute.

"At ease, Commander," I said. "It's good to see you again."

"And you as well, ma'am." True to her nature as a spook, her tone revealed nothing. She turned to face her colleague Lieutenant Lloyd. "Lieutenant."

"Commander," the other ONI operative acknowledged.

"I'll be meeting with you separately later, son. Keep an eye on your datapad for my message."

"Yes, ma'am." Then he looked to me. "By your leave, Colonel?"

I nodded. "Go ahead, Cal. You're dismissed." That left only Major Brewer, so I faced her next. "Major, we'll be in contact again soon as well. In the meantime, go through the report I sent you, and then we'll meet back up with the spooks before I return groundside. We'll discuss what to do with your battalion for now, where we should deploy Commander Hayden here, and when we'll start disembarking supplies from the Excalibur."

"Understood, Colonel," Brewer replied.

The newly arrived battalion commander came to attention again and saluted, then promptly left the hangar bay, following Lloyd out the doors into the hallway. I wondered fleetingly if she'd get up the gumption to talk to him â€" I'd seen no ring on her finger, and since Cal was the equivalent of a Marine captain in terms of rank, only one pay grade separated them.

But right now, that was far from the first thing on my mind. Right now, I needed to find out if I had to tell a good friend that she had become a widow.

Surprising me, Courtney Hayden gave me a small smile as soon as the major and the spook were gone.

"Well, I'm glad that's out of the way," she said. "I hate stuffy formalities. How are you? It's been some time."

I shrugged. "Can't complain, for the most part. Willis and the kids are all doing well, and groundside operations are a bit hairy at the moment, but nothing too crazy yet."

"And you were promoted, I see."

"Yep. More out of necessity than anything else I think, but everyone insists I earned it."

"I have no doubt you did, Cooper. You've always been young for your rank and a gifted field officer. Congratulations."

"Thanks." I shifted uncomfortably then, knowing I should tell her what I knew sooner rather than later, but finding that the words were hard to say aloud. I swallowed. "Listen, Courtney, there's somethingâ€¦maybe we shouldâ€¦"

It was the first time I noticed the hint of something flash in her eyes, and her tone of voice seemed to change almost abruptly, though in a very subtle way.

"It's okay, Natalie. I know. Iâ€¦found out on the ship on our way

here." She chuckled humorlessly. "Sometimes being a spook and having first access to everything isn'tâ€|pleasant. I was so excited to learn that Oliver and I were getting posted together, and then â€"

For a moment I watched her struggle to maintain her composure, but she got it back. Then she looked at me again. "Were you there, when he died?" she asked quietly. "Did you see it?"

"Yeah."

The single word came straight out, and the memory flooded my mind at the same time: my best friend shouting orders at his Marines as we fought the Storm in the forest on the mainland along with the rebels. I'd turned my head when I'd heard his voice and looked, just in time to watch him take a full burst from a Storm rifle right in the chest and gut. I'd screamed his name in the pouring rain and rushed over to him, even amid the chaotic fighting going on all around us and at my aide's protest, but by the time Doc Reynolds had gotten there, Major Oliver Hayden was already dead. The lethal plasma rounds had killed him instantly.

And just like that, our joint command had come to an end. And my best friend's life was over.

Lieutenant Commander Hayden dropped her gaze to the deck now at my brief response and covered her eyes for a second. "Christ, Cooper. What happened?"

"Heâ€|" I paused, swallowed a second time, and continued, "It was the Storm. He took too many rounds, burned through his chestplate during our big assault in the forest. It was instantaneous. He got hit, lights went out, andâ€|he was gone. I'm so sorry."

Hayden's wife just stood there for a long moment, digesting the information. No doubt she'd already gotten a general sense of how her husband had perished in combat, but hearing the details was always different and likely reopened the very fresh wound of his death. She didn't say anything for several minutes, and all I thought of in that time was how I would've felt if the situation had been reversed. I wouldn't have taken the news half as well as she had if Willis had been the one who'd been killed instead of Oliver.

Finally, she spoke.

"You know what I kept thinking during the rest of the trip here?" she asked me then. "I thought about my boys back home. I wondered how the hell I was supposed to tell our three sons that their father was gone. Now I won't even get to see them until this is over."

I didn't know what to say in reply to that. Willis had scared me a few times too over the years, and I'd wondered the same thing to myself about our own kids. The difference was that to me, it'd always just been a hypothetical thought. To Hayden, it was a reality. This had truly happened to her now, and when she got home, she'd really have to tell her boys the ugly truth.

She glanced back up at me then after a while and sighed, the pain clearly visible in her eyes. With her ONI training I knew she could've hidden it from me if she wanted to, but she didn't.

"I want to see him," she said suddenly, resolute. "I want to see his body. Will you come with me?"

"Courtney," I answered gently, "Oliver'sâ€|down in the morgue now aboard ship. You know that. He got shot up pretty bad in the chest. I don't think â€" "

But Lieutenant Commander Hayden shook her head. "Just his face, Cooper. I just want to see my husband's face one last time."

\* \* \*

><p>I followed Courtney Hayden down the <em>Affair<em>'s elevator to the penultimate deck, where the dead were kept in their own separate steel boxes in a giant freezer to preserve their bodies until they could be transported back home to their loved ones. It was a more efficient storage system for those killed in action than using bulky cryotubes, which were instead reserved for the living. I didn't envy the morgue techs or the burial squads their jobs, but I knew someone had to do it.

The Navy lieutenant in charge saluted Hayden and I when we approached and inquired as to why we were down there.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Courtney Hayden, ONI," the spook said, as if her uniform didn't already show what she was. "I'm here to view my husband, Major Oliver Hayden."

"Ma'am, he's â€" "

"I know, Lieutenant," Hayden replied. "I won't be long."

The morgue tech sighed, having no choice but to admit her. "Yes, ma'am." He glanced down at his datapad in hand. "His body's stored in aisle sixteen, row nine, box four. I can raise the temperature a bit while you're inside, but you've only got five minutes, Commander."

Hayden's wife nodded and we stepped inside. I'd never been in the morgue of a ship before, so the cold was startling. I pulled my uniform jacket's collar up to cover my neck and hugged myself a little as we walked. My battledress clothes seemed slow to compensate against the huge temperature drop.

Hayden, however, almost didn't appear to notice. She trooped ahead of me fast, finding the right aisle and row in less than a minute. Then an enlisted technician came around the corner on the other side and pointed out the correct box.

"Here's where the major is, ma'am," he said to Hayden. "Would you like me to open it up for you?"

"Yes," she answered without hesitation.

"Very well, Commander."

I stood back and off to the side while the tech used a code to unlock the box. Slowly he gripped the large handle with both hands and pulled it out. On the thin slab of steel was a frozen body, covered

with a light blue sheet. The tech looked to Hayden again, who was suddenly stony-faced.

"Ma'am?"

"Pull back the sheet, Chief," she ordered. "Just the head."

"Aye, ma'am."

The tech did as he was told and I turned away. I'd seen dead bodies countless times before on battlefields across the galaxy in my career, but this wasn't how I wanted to remember my best friend. I wanted to remember Oliver as the vibrant, funny guy I'd loved like a brother, not a frozen, lifeless corpse on a cold piece of steel.

I heard his wife's sharp intake of breath then, and I shivered. Shortly after that, I heard the lieutenant commander fall to her knees beside her husband's body and begin to weep. Her unrestrained sobs filled the dark, cool narrow halls of the morgue and made the place all the more morbid and full of sorrow than it already was.

By the end of it, I wished I hadn't agreed to come.

#### 14. Chapter 13: Solace

##### **\*\*Chapter Thirteen: Solace\*\***

After what I'd just witnessed, I felt like I needed a stiff drink. I left Hayden's wife's company discreetly, figuring she'd want some time to herself for a while to come to grips with things. I wondered if she regretted her decision to see Oliver's body now, but I wasn't going to ask. I knew Courtney Hayden would tell me if she wanted to, and if not, then it wasn't something I needed to know.

The elevator pinged sharply when it reached the third deck and I stepped off the platform, turning right in the hallway to head down the corridor towards the senior officer's wardroom. I knew my way there by heart now, and it took only a few more minutes to get there. Once inside, I reached around the bar for my favorite bottle of whiskey and poured myself a hearty glass, then set the bottle back where I got it.

I didn't take it into the rec room this time. Instead, I carried it over to a set of worn but soft leather chairs and sunk down into one, careful not to spill my drink. After a moment I took my first sip and let out a sigh, relishing the comfortable seat after so many days on my feet dirtside. As I took another swallow of the strong liquor, I had to admit that this was one of the better perks of having been made a lieutenant colonel.

The wardroom was thankfully empty at the moment, which was one of the reasons I'd chosen to remain here rather than move to the rec room. It was tranquil here, quiet, and I could be alone with my thoughts â€" or escape them, given enough drink â€" and not have to talk to anyone else for a while.

That was my idea, anyway. I was alone for all of ten minutes, lost in my thoughts â€" or perhaps trying to lose them â€" when I heard a voice come from behind me.

"Command weighing heavy on you already, Cooper?" Captain Rhodes asked. He smiled faintly as he walked over to the bar, too, to pour himself a drink. "Brace yourself, Colonel. It only gets worse the higher you go."

I immediately stood at attention at his presence and saluted, almost tossing my drink. "Captain Rhodes, sir. I wasn't expecting you here."

"Heh. Neither was I. But sometimes we surprise ourselves, huh?" He took a sip from his glass, then turned around to regard me. "At ease, Colonel. How're things going groundside? That last report I got from your spook seemed to indicate that you were making progress."

"Yes, sir. That's not exactly what brings me here. Although, God knows things on the surface haven't been easy. But we're doing all right, for now."

The CO of the Suave Affair nodded, then gestured to my cup. "So why the drink?"

"Major Hayden was my best friend, sir. And today I just found out his wife was aboard the Excalibur that just arrived. She'd already found out in transit that she was a widow, but today I think it really sunk in. It was hard to watch, sir. Our families have been friends for years."

"I understand. It's hard to lose a battle buddy. Even harder to see the toll his death takes on his wife and kids." He took another drink. "I also imagine you miss being able to share your command burden with someone."

"He was a great help to me when we first landed on Khan, sir," I responded. "I'm no stranger to battlefields or leadership; I know how to do my job. But before this mission I'd spent the last four years after the War living a pretty cushy life on Earth with my family. No combat for a long while, just reconstruction work in North America." I took a sip and shook my head, remembering a life that seemed far away now. "I got to go home every day and usually had the weekends off. Hayden was five years older than me, already more experienced with a battalion command, and he'd spent most of his time after the war fighting the rebs here in the Outer Colonies. He was damn near perfect for the job, sir."

"Except for the fact that he wasn't at all diplomatically inclined," Rhodes countered. "And without your alliance with the locals, which I know from numerous after-action reports was entirely your doing, I believe you would have lost the battle on the mainland against the Remnant." He leaned back against the bar. "And with that, your forces would have been divided, decimated, and wholly weakened for when the Prometheans finally arrived. You would've been surrounded on all sides by enemies, and even an extra battalion of Marines from the Excalibur wouldn't have helped." He fixed his gaze on me now. "So do you still doubt your qualifications and abilities?"

"Not publicly, sir."

The Navy captain chuckled. "That's a good answer, Cooper. But in all seriousness, don't question your promotion too much. I know why the



admiral chose to give you this, and I know why I put in a good word myself. Not everyone has the guts to face the rebels as you have â€" or the drive to keep doing what they know is right in the long run for their men despite the personal attacks Laraza has made against you." He finished his drink then, set the glass on the bar behind him, and walked over to squeeze my shoulder before he left. "You may be a bit young for the job, Cooper, but no one believes you're incapable. Your track record suggests anything but. I know it's not an easy burden to carry on your own. I know you still mourn the loss of your friend. But this mission was meant for you, Colonel."

\* \* \*

><p>Captain Rhodes left me immediately after that to contemplate his words. Yet as I sat back down in the chair once he was gone, I thought again of Hayden's wife and her breakdown instead, and found it was all too much to try to take in at once. I downed the rest of my drink in one gulp and walked out.<p>

I realized then that I wasn't going to find consolation in drink or reassuring words. I was going to find it where I always had, throughout the years and before I'd even joined the Marine Corps. I was going to find it with Willis.

I found him lounging in our bunk in our quarters, dressed only in a T-shirt, the pants of his fatigues, dogtags, and socks. I noticed he'd shaved his beard and trimmed his short, golden brown hair while I'd been gone, to keep with regulations. He glanced up and gave me a small smile when he saw me come in.

"Hey, Cooper."

"Hi, Will."

He moved to get up when he saw me coming towards the bed, but I motioned for him to stay put.

"Don't get up," I said. "I need a quick rest, too."

I walked over to the desk then to pull off my jacket and boots, gently rubbing the spot on my upper left arm where the bandage still covered my wound, now steadily healing. Then I saw it.

A smile spread wide across my face as I spotted a piece of dessert and an unlit candle on the small table. The candle was the number fourteen, denoting not the date we were belatedly celebrating, but the number of years we'd been together as a couple now. With the memory of what Courtney Hayden had just gone through fresh in my mind, I felt luckier than ever that we'd made it this far without tragedy cutting our time short. It was bittersweet, though, because of what I knew my friend was going through. But I tried not to let those dismal thoughts ruin the moment.

From the bed, my husband smiled, too. "That's my belated Valentine's Day present, Coop. Turns out there's no fresh flowers or heart-shaped boxes of chocolate on boardâ€|but there \_is\_ chocolate cake if you ask the cooks nicely enough."

For a moment I just stood there with a dumbfounded grin, hardly believing the goody he'd managed to procure for us. I quirked an

eyebrow at him, still smiling. "How did you do it?"

Willis chuckled. "Nope, not telling, Cooper. That's my secret."

And in the moment I didn't care. I went right over to the bunk, crawled over Willis, and gave him a long, passionate kiss. He kissed me back with equal fervor, and it was several minutes before we finally pulled back and came up for air again.

When we did, my husband was smirking at me. "Like the cake?"

"Love it," I answered, and I leaned down and kissed him again.

"Good. Let's go eat it."

I put my hand on his shoulder to stop him as he started to get up again. "Wait a sec. Not yet. Turn over a little."

Willis raised an eyebrow at me but did as I asked. Once he was lying on his side with his back to me, I settled in behind him on the bed and put my arm around him. I slipped my left hand underneath the bottom of his T-shirt then and slowly slid it up until I got to his chest, where his heart was. There I stopped, laying my hand flat against his warm skin, and lightly pressed my lips behind his ear.

"I love you, Will," I whispered to him softly. "So much. Don't forget that."

My husband placed his own left hand on mine over his shirt then, our wedding rings touching now between the fabric. Then he said, just as quiet, "I love you, too, Natalie."

## 15. Chapter 14: A New Purpose

### **\*\*Chapter Fourteen: A New Purpose\*\***

I inhaled sharply against my pillow the next morning as a sudden shrill sound filled our quarters. It took a moment for my sleep-muddled brain to recognize it as my datapad chiming. I went into action fast if a bit clumsily, groping around the small nightstand for the device. It came squealing into my hands and I answered it on the fourth ring.

"Hello?" I mumbled sleepily.

"Hello. Is this Major Cooper?" a familiar voice with a faint Spanish accent replied.

"\_Lieutenant Colonel\_ Cooper," I corrected, pulling up the sheets around my chest with my free hand. I'd realized while I'd sat up that I was naked underneath the covers. Not that it mattered for a call since it was audio-only, but still. "I told you that the last time we spoke, Laraza. What do you want?"

I felt Willis stir beside me then, but he was either still asleep or not alert enough yet to notice I was on a call. In the meantime, I strained to hear the rebel leader/town mayor's words over the bad

planet-to-ship connection.

"I wanted to let you know that I looked at the data chip you gave me a week ago. I have watched the video as well."

"And?"

He released a sigh. "It is a problem, like you said."

That was as close to a \_"You were right"\_ as I was ever going to get out of him. I took it for what it was and nodded to myself.

"Okay. Does that mean you've rethought what I said that day? About extending the truce?"

"Yes, \_Colonel\_. I am willing now to discuss terms."

"Well, you already know what I want, Mr. Laraza. What're your conditions?"

The mayor chuckled. "Mine are always the same as well, Cooper. When the threat on our city and planet is gone, we want you gone as well. That includes your troops and your ships. \_Both\_ of them."

"And in return you'll let my Marines land on the mainland again? We can set up a temporary operations base on the coast and count on your men's support if we need it?"

"It is not what I would personally wish to agree to, but circumstances dictate that I do not act rashly in this case. Yes."

I shifted a little. "All right. You've got yourself a deal, then." My voice hardened then as I felt the bandaged wound on my left arm â€" where the bullet had grazed me â€" start to throb. "But Laraza, one thing."

"Please, tell me."

"If I come out with so much as another \_scratch\_ on the mainland, and I suspect that it's you, all bets are off this time. Permanently. We'll pack up and leave, and you'll get what you want. The UNSC will be out of your hair. But it also means that you and your people will be left to handle what's on Qamar Island on your own, without our aid. We'll just sit back and watch from our ships to see what you're able to do in response. The same goes if \_any\_ of my Marines are harmed. Do we have an understanding?"

It was a bluff. Even as supreme ground commander, I didn't have the authority to completely call off our mission here on Khan. But I hoped if I played hardball with the mayor now, he'd think twice about ordering someone to take another shot at me â€" or anyone else who wore the uniform.

His response came after a long moment's silence. "Iâ€¦understand, Colonel. I shallâ€¦ensure that my men do not act of their own accord and put our truce in peril."

'\_Act of their own accord' my ass,\_' I thought to myself. Aloud, though, I said, "Good. Then if that's all, I've got other business to attend to now. My Marines will be returning to Redwood Falls soon. I

hope you'll alert your people of our renewed pact before then."

"Of course. All shall be ready for your arrival."

"It'd better be, Laraza. Cooper out."

I hung up then and sat there for a moment, letting out a long sigh as I rubbed at my temple. For the life of me I couldn't comprehend why Mayor Laraza had to be such a difficult man to deal with. It was good that we'd been able to come to an agreement again, but getting there was always like pulling teeth. I was starting to see why Hayden had preferred a no-holds-barred approach with the locals when I noticed Willis blink up at me from his pillow.

"Who was that?" he asked, his voice thick with sleep.

"Mayor Javier Laraza, asshole extraordinaire," I answered irritably, settling myself back down on the bunk but keeping my datapad in hand. I checked the time on it and groaned. It was just after 0500. "See, this is why I don't get any sleep. The guy's up at all hours and always assumes everyone else is, too."

Willis chuckled then and moved in closer to wrap his arms around me, giving me a deep kiss as a pleasant morning greeting. "And here I thought it was me who kept you from getting much sleep last night."

I smirked as I kissed him back. "There's that, but I meantâ€¦nevermind."

"I know. I'm just teasing, Coop."

It became apparent very quickly that we were headed back in that direction, but despite the early hour, this morning I knew I couldn't spare the time. Now that I'd finally gotten the truce I wanted with Laraza's men, I needed to start getting our own groundside affairs in order. The sooner I could get things established on the surface, the sooner I could start getting the scientists off-loaded and begin dealing with our ever-precarious alien problem.

It was hard to muster up the self-control to convey this to my husband, however. I ran my free hand over his short hair as I kissed him, then forced myself to pull back before things got too heated again.

"What?" Willis asked.

"No time, sorry," I replied, sitting up again as I brought my datapad up and started typing a message. "Laraza just agreed to an extension of the truce so I've got to work fast now. We need to prepare the Marines and supplies from the Excalibur for departure to the surface, and I need to check in with Harris and Warfield to see if things are clear for the scientists to land." I spared him a quick glance. "You've got work to do, too."

"I do?"

I nodded, returning my attention to the message. "Yup. You're going to go see your CO Major Collins and ask if she can spare an extra squadron to help ferry things down. Tell her it's just temporary this

time. I don't want to pull Victor or Kilo off their stations in case the Prometheans or Storm attack again before we get back."

My husband let out a loud sigh of resignation. "All right." Then he turned over, facing away from me now, and mumbled, "Sometimes I hate that we got promoted again, Cooper."

I smiled faintly as I finished typing the message, then placed a hand on his bare shoulder and leaned down to kiss his hair. "Sometimes I do, too. But this is what we signed up for, honey."

With that I got out of bed, quickly pulled on my underclothes, then stole Willis's T-shirt and put that on, too. After that I fished out a pair of my PT shorts from the closet, shimmied into them, and grabbed a towel.

"I'm going to go take a quick shower and then I'll be back to get dressed," I said. "We've got a briefing with Major Brewer and both spooks in half an hour at 0530. I just sent them a message. You should do the same or you won't have time to talk to Collins beforehand."

Willis sighed again as he finally sat up himself and pulled back the sheets. "Right."

I picked up his boxers off the floor and tossed them at him with a mischievous grin. "Remember not to leave in your birthday suit."

My husband smiled, too, but didn't say anything as he pulled them on. Then he started rummaging in the closet himself for another shirt to wear. In the meantime, I passed our small desk on my way out and noticed my two pill bottles sitting there. I slung my towel over one shoulder and stopped to take my meds, then took a swig of water from my canteen to wash them down.

I was busy frowning at the ones I took for the nightmares when Willis closed the closet door and saw me, his own smile fading.

"How many of those do you have left, Natalie?"

"Enough for two more weeks I think. Maybe three."

Willis nodded. "I'll try to shower fast so I can see about talking to the \_Excalibur\_'s doc, too. I'm sure he's got some stored somewhere." He placed a hand around the back of my head then and gently pressed his lips above my eyebrow. "It'll be okay, honey, like I said. Don't worry about it."

As usual, I wished I could be as confident as my husband that everything would work out. For now, though, I had plenty of other things on my plate to take care of. So I pushed the thought aside in my mind and walked out.

\* \* \*

><p>I met back up with Willis in the hallway once we were both showered and dressed and handed him a cup of coffee and an energy bar, the stand-in meal for when we were in a pinch. He took his drink in stride like I did, swallowed a hot sip, and looked over at me.<p>

"Thanks, Coop. I really needed this."

"No problem. I figured you might. I can't be the only one who thanks God every day for caffeine."

Willis chuckled. "Nope. I'll see you at the briefing, honey. Gotta go catch Collins and the doc now, if I can."

"Hop to it, Major," I teased.

"Yes, ma'am," my husband responded with a grin.

Once he disappeared around a corner, I continued making my way toward our meeting place fast, hoping to get there in time to catch Hayden before she arrived. I felt awful putting her into gear at a time like this, so I needed to find out if she felt up to the task. Even spooks were entitled to a brief period of mourning, although I had to admit that her presence on the ground would be a big help now that I was splitting my forces. I guess I'd just have to see what she thought.

I finally reached the room with ten minutes to spare. No one was there yet. Reluctantly, I shoved my energy bar into the cargo pocket of my fatigues to eat later and rushed to down the rest of my coffee before people showed up. After that I set my datapad on the table, turning it on as I waited. I pressed a button and had it project two different maps side-by-side: one of mainland Khan near the city of Redwood Falls, and another of the island. Both displays had just popped up when Lieutenant Commander Courtney Hayden filed in.

Her appearance was impeccable this morning; you never would have guessed from looking at her that she'd been through any emotional turmoil the previous day. We went through the usual routine of saluting, and then she relaxed, standing quiet and still on the other side of the table in her black battledress uniform.

I wished I could think of something comforting to say to my friend, but I knew that ultimately nothing would change what had happened to Oliver. So I decided on something simple instead.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

Hayden rubbed at her eyes. "I'm not really sure, actually. I think I went through a million emotions at once yesterday. I even got mad at Oliver for being dead, for letting himself get killed and leaving me and our boys like this." She glanced at the table then, still not meeting my gaze. "Now, I've finally settled on empty. I'm hoping the mission will change that."

"Courtney, you don't have to "

"Yes, I do. And I want to, Cooper. Really. Anything's better than sitting around sulking and brooding and crying over this. I'd rather have something to do, you know? Keep my mind off it."

That, at least, I understood perfectly well. I didn't say it out loud, but I'd felt the same myself when my second pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage during the War. Everyone had thought that I wouldn't want to do anything after I'd lost Willis's and my baby, that I'd

just shut down and shut myself out. In a way I had for a while, emotionally at least, the same way Hayden's wife had now. But I hadn't given up my company command. I took it back once I was able and well enough physically to do it, and I'd relished having a purpose and something to focus on again other than the terrible, engulfing heartache.

In some ways, I now thought my work had actually helped me heal some. I'd never really recovered fully from the blow, but Willis and Gabe and my Marines " and eventually the twins, too, once they were born " had given me enough of a push to get through it.

I thought about somehow trying to convey this all to Courtney but found that the words wouldn't come. I'd always been loath to mention the loss, so I said nothing, only nodding my head in silent agreement.

Major Dani Brewer appeared through the hatch then, saving either of us from more uncomfortable conversation.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, ma'am," she said, saluting.

I saluted back briefly. "Welcome, Major Brewer. At ease."

Navy Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd came in shortly after, followed lastly by my husband. I folded my arms across my chest and began as soon as they were all inside, huddled around the opposite side of the table.

"Good morning, everyone," I said. "I apologize for assembling you all so early, but I got a very interesting datapad call from Mayor Laraza about thirty minutes ago. The locals decided they're finally ready to play ball, so this is it." I tapped my datapad then, making sure the conference link to Majors Harris and Warfield dirtside was working as well. "Majors, how's the connection down there?"

"A little unsteady, ma'am, but I can hear you," Harris answered.

"Same, Colonel," Warfield added.

"Good. So here's the skinny: I'm going to go ahead and set up a staging area on the mainland, per my agreement with the rebels. It'll be on the coast, about ten clicks outside of Redwood Falls. We'll bring down Major Brewer's reinforcement battalion to remain on standby there and be ready to deploy to the island when we need them, or to eventually relieve the 904th or the Eighth if things are quiet. In the case of the latter, we'll rotate the units in and out one battalion at a time.

"It won't be a permanent outpost like Columbia was, but we should get the basics like a field hospital and a mess tent set up over there for immediate use. Major Harris?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Pull Alpha Company off the lines and tell them to gear up. We'll need some engineers to construct things for us on the mainland and get started on putting up some amenities."

"Got it, Colonel."

"Major Hawk?"

"Ma'am," Willis said in front of me.

I looked over at him. "What's the status on the extra flock of birds? Do we have them?"

"That's affirmative, Colonel. I just got the go-ahead from Major Collins. Cobra Squadron is ready."

"Excellent. Then Hawk, I want you to coordinate with Cobra's leader on shuttling down troops and supplies from the Excalibur to the surface. We're also going to need transport for A Company from Qamar to the mainland."

Willis nodded. "Understood, ma'am."

"Lieutenant Lloyd, you and I will return to the island shortly along with Major Hawk, as soon as preparations have been made," I said. "Lieutenant Commander Hayden will go down with Major Brewer and her Marines to keep an eye on things around the Falls. Specifically, I want a set of eyes and ears on the mainland to keep tabs on the locals – namely Laraza. Make sure they keep their end of the bargain and don't cause trouble for us while we're down there."

Hayden nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

I stepped back and glanced at the holographic maps hovering over the table then. "All right, that leaves just one more thing. Warfield, Harris, how are your sectors of the island looking? Are we clear to bring in the scientists yet?"

"It's been quiet for a while down here, Colonel," Harris responded. "Even by the ruins. I'd say we're good to go, ma'am. Ready as we'll ever be, anyway."

"Cole?"

"The 904th's perimeter is green," he said tersely.

I raised an eyebrow at his tone but said nothing. I'd deal with the major once I was back on the surface.

"Okay," I said then, unfolding my arms and bracing my hands against the edge of the table instead. "Then this mission's a go, everyone. We'll get the scientists out to Qamar as well, and let's see what they turn up."

## 16. Chapter 15: Times Like These

**\*\*Chapter Fifteen: Times Like These\*\***

**\*\*1204 Hours, February 19, 2558. UNSC Staging Camp, Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Rough Start," Outer Colonies. Day One of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\***



The midday sun was warmer than usual on the mainland. Dressed in full gear, I'd rolled up the sleeves of my battledress jacket underneath my body armor, taken off my helmet, and put on my sunglasses instead to keep cool. With my DMR slung over one shoulder, I walked alongside Major Dani Brewer as she took me through the camp, showing me the progress Alpha Company of the 8th Engineers had made with the construction, and telling me how the Marines of her 213th Infantry Battalion were settling in.

"Here's the mess tent, Colonel," she said as she pointed out a large canvas structure ahead of us. "That was the first to go up. And that other big tent down there is the field hospital. It's already been completed, too" and stocked with medical supplies and a few of the doctors from the Ex. We've already brought most of the ammo crates and equipment down as well, but those are all stacked up on the far side until we can build a makeshift armory for 'em. The temporary barracks"

"Alpha's still working on that, I see," I said, cutting her off again.

Brewer seemed to like being very thorough in her reports, whereas I liked being told only what I needed to know to get the gist of things. I wondered if her previous commander had been a real hardass about that, or if it was just her personality. Either way, I wasn't annoyed with her. She'd only just arrived. I knew she'd learn how things were run under my charge with time.

"What about the motor pool, Major?" I asked.

"That's still in the works as well, ma'am. We should be getting three more MTBs and four extra 'Hogs from the Excalibur tomorrow afternoon. Alpha's focusing most of their energy on personnel accommodations now."

I nodded. "As they should."

I knew that wouldn't take much longer, either, as the "barracks" the engineers were putting up were such in name only. They wouldn't be as sturdy or complete as Outpost Columbia's had been, with beds and closets and desks. The Marines here in the staging area would get a roof, a cot, maybe a thin partition, and not much else. Still, it was better than sleeping in the dirt under the stars like we did on the island.

I finally stopped walking then and Brewer came to a halt beside me. Glancing down at my watch, I saw that twenty minutes had gone by since we'd started our trek. I didn't want to spend too much more time here on the mainland, and I had a few other things I wanted to get done before I returned to Qamar, so I turned to face the major again to wrap things up.

"Thanks for the tour, Dani," I said to her. "Keep up the good work. And be sure to keep your men on their toes, too. We might be needing them soon."

Major Brewer nodded in acknowledgment. "I will, ma'am. Thank you."

Gripping my helmet in one hand, I walked off to the side then and met

back up with my pilot for this trip, Captain Brandon Heat. He was grinning beneath his own sunglasses when I approached, and he quickly fell into step beside me.

"Damn. I thought she'd never shut up," he said. "Thought I'd have to leave you here and come back tomorrow to pick you up, Colonel."

"Be nice. She's just trying to do her job right. We all get nervous under new COs sometimes â€" you never know who the hell you're going to end up with. For all she knows I eat this shit up. She'll come around." I gave him a sharp look. "She's also your superior officer, Brandon. Show some respect."

Heat sighed. "Yes, ma'am."

"Why aren't you hanging out by the bird, anyway? This can't be very exciting for you."

"Neither's sitting around in the cockpit waiting for you, ma'am, but that's not it, either." He looked at me like he was trying to decide how much he should say. Finally he added, "I promised Willis I'd keep an eye on you this time. Because of what happened with Laraza and the reb. He wants to make sure you get back to Qamar in one piece."

I smiled weakly. "It's a nice thought, but if Laraza really wants to tag me, the bastard already knows he can. If someone had me in their crosshairs right now I wouldn't even know it, and I'd be dead on the ground before you did, too." I shrugged. "It's all luck of the draw sometimes."

"Yeah? I hear you survived the last sniper who got you."

"I did, but I don't bet on that happening twice." I frowned then. "Let's talk about something else. That's not really something I like to remember."

"Right, Colonel. Sorry."

I spent the next half-hour going through the camp to talk to some of the men and women, stopping to ask how they were doing, how the work was going, and what they thought of the amenities so far. It was just small talk, but it got their minds off the mission for a moment and gave me a chance to gauge the collective mood. I made a conscious effort to include both engineers and infantrymen in my interviews, and junior officers as well as enlisted Marines. I already knew how the upper echelon felt; I wanted to know how the bulk of the boots on the ground were handling things.

Morale seemed pretty level for now, and the Marines I spoke to seemed grateful that I'd asked after them. I passed around words of encouragement and praise, too, then turned to head back to the Pelican with Heat.

That's when we walked by a group of Marines that looked a little different from the rest. Their uniforms weren't crisp and clean like the others', but already covered in mainland Khan's red dirt â€" and even blackened in some places, like they'd been scorched. They were also busy cleaning their weapons with special care rather than lounging or training or unpacking. Curious, I stopped to speak to a lance corporal among them when I saw him.

I couldn't believe my eyes for minute, but I knew that face anywhere. Our parents' brown hair that all us Cooper kids had inherited, shaved close to his scalp; our mom's brown eyes that contrasted sharply with me and our older brother Mark's green ones — the ones we'd gotten from our dad; and the twin silver bars of a captain on his uniform collar. He was sitting on an empty crate on the ground, scraping the last of his MRE into his mouth when I said his name.

"Travis?"

The Marine's eyes went wide as he glanced up at me. "Natalie?"

An excited laugh escaped me as I stepped forward to give him a huge hug the instant he got up.

"Holy shit, Trav! It's been a frickin' year since I've seen you!"

Travis smiled wide, too. "Heh. Yeah, it's been a while."

Behind us, Captain Heat just stood there confused.

"Iâ€|take it you know this guy?" he asked.

Travis and I turned at the same time, an arm around each other's shoulders. I beamed at Willis's friend.

"This is my little brother, Heat," I said. Not moving my arm from my brother's shoulder, I used the other one to point to his name patch, where the word "COOPER" was sewn in big letters. "See? My kid brother's a bona fide company commander now."

"Not quite, big sis," Travis said then. He turned to the small group of Marines around him and gestured. "This is it, Natalie. This is my team. Fourteen of the best guys and gals you've ever seen rig shit to blow."

"You mean you're not a tanker anymore?" I asked.

"Nope. Switched to demolitions after the war. And I couldn't be happier." He pulled me off to the side then, away from the others, and said, "There's more, too."

"What?"

My brother grinned wide again as he produced a small picture from his breast pocket and showed it to me. "My girlfriend had the baby just before I shipped out to come here, Nat. I've got a son."

I grinned, too. "Another nephew for me, huh? Now I've got two of each." Our late older sister Jenna had also had a boy a few years before she'd been KIA, and Mark had two daughters. I knew this was Travis's first, though. I lightly touched his arm, still smiling. "He's a cutie. Congrats, Trav. How's it feel to be a papa?"

"Scary. Amazing. I only got a few weeks with the little guy before I left, but it'sâ€|it's really something else, sis."

I chuckled. "Yeah. Your first can feel like that. What's his

name?"

"We named him Adam Roy Cooper. Kelsey insisted."

Emotion momentarily welled up inside me â€" not enough for tears, but enough that I felt it. "You guys named him after Dad."

"Yep."

"He would've liked that."

There'd been five of us Cooper kids at our father's funeral nearly twenty-seven years ago. Our older siblings Jenna and Mark had been ten and eight, respectively. I'd been four, Travis had been one, and our little sister Allison had only been a couple months old at the time. Our mother had died five years ago during the War, too, but Jenna was gone by then, and the rest of us had been spread around the globe on Earth fighting the Covenant and the Flood. There'd been little time after the war either to remember our parents, and for that I felt sad.

It was why I'd chosen to remain a Cooper when I'd married Willis. I'd wanted to do something to remember my dad by, and I hadn't wanted to let go of my link to our large, close-knit clan. So I'd decided to keep my last name rather than change it. Willis had understood my choice and had never had a problem with it.

"So what else is new, Trav?" I asked my younger brother, forcing the thoughts aside.

Travis shrugged. "Nothing much besides that. Now I'm here and apparently under the leadership of my older sister," he said with a smile. "Soâ€¦I'm at your disposal when you need it, Colonel." He gestured again to his team. "All of us."

I wanted to stay longer to catch up with my brother, but knew I'd already lingered here long enough. I gave Travis one last hug, told him to keep safe, then took off with Heat again towards our ride â€" and Qamar.

\* \* \*

><p>I put my helmet back on just before we landed on the island, then said my goodbyes to Willis's best friend and disembarked. Seeing that things were still oddly quiet over here, I went and sought out Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd first to see if he had any updates.<p>

"Colonel Cooper, ma'am," he said as I approached. "Back from the mainland already?"

"Yeah. Wasn't much to it out there yet. The engineers are making good progress though, and Commander Hayden said the rebs've been keeping to themselves so far."

"That's good, ma'am."

I nodded, then glanced at him and grinned. "Your lady friend asked about you, you know."

Lloyd's cheeks immediately went red. "I'm sorry, Colonel. I know Major Brewer's my superior and I'm not supposed to â€" "

I barked a laugh. "Lighten up, Cal. I'm just giving you a hard time. But thanks for confirming what I thought."

The spook looked upset at himself for slipping, even in front of a friend. I put a hand on his shoulder to reassure him.

"Listen. Your difference in rank is small, you're both officers, and you're not in each other's direct chain of command. Under the circumstances, I've been known to look the other way with things like this. Just make sure you keep it professional on-duty â€" as I know you will â€" and as far as I'm concerned, there's no problem. Okay?"

The ONI operative nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am." He furrowed his brow then. "So does that mean she didn't ask about me?"

"No. She did. Brewer was just more subtle about it â€" which is strange because you're the spook."

"Ha ha. I get it. I'm bad at this."

"Maybe a little, but you'll get the hang of it." I folded my arms across my chest, still smirking. "So. Business talk now. What's going on with the scientists in the ruins?"

Lieutenant Lloyd seemed relieved to be back in his element. "They've been busy the past few days, Colonel. They haven't found any more passages out of the chamber yet, but they have been able to identify some of the symbols on the walls. No translations on the locations, but it looks like there's at least five portals down there â€" two are confirmed to be active, three aren't."

I frowned. "Shit. Somehow knowing but not makes it worse. I want to find out where the hell the Storm and Prometheans are coming from already."

"As do I, ma'am, and I'm sure the brains do, too. They've only been planetside three days, though. I bet â€" "

Both of us nearly jumped then as several Marines let out ear-splitting screams at once. Caleb and I both brought our weapons to bear at the same time, fearing a renewed attack by the Remnant or Prometheans on our lines. Instead, when we scanned the area for the source of the commotion, there was nothing.

Then the Navy lieutenant pointed his battle rifle upward and bumped my shoulder. Hard.

"Colonel, look! Up there! Holy â€" !"

I looked up at the sky where he was pointing and saw it. I gripped my rifle tighter in my hands and simply stared for a moment.

A huge explosion had just erupted in orbit up above. Though we obviously couldn't hear it, we could definitely see it, and that's why some of the Marines had cried out. I kept an ear on the general COM channel to hear what had happened, but no one was broadcasting

anything yet. I turned back to the spook.

"Cal? What the fuck is going on?"

He held up a finger. "Wait one, ma'am. I'm receiving a message from Hayden right now. Encrypted." There was a long pause, then, "Son of a \_bitch\_."

"What?" I asked, more urgently this time.

Lloyd looked at me then, his expression hard. "That thing that just went up in smoke was the \_Suave Affair\_, Colonel. We've got a Storm ship right above us."

## 17. Chapter 16: Zero Hour

**\*\*Chapter Sixteen: Zero Hour\*\***

"Breaking, breaking, breaking!"

"Echo Squadron, get after them!"

"\_Watch the starboard wing!\_"

"\_Ahhhhhhrrrrggggghhh!\_"

"Bogies, ten o'clock!"

Major William "Willis" Hawk's shipboard COM was suddenly inundated with tens of reports in a matter of seconds. One minute he'd been flying his usual route around the island, checking in with both Kilo and Victor Squadrons to be sure the ground was clear, and the next all hell had broken loose. It made for a dizzying attempt to keep up with the fragments of radio chatter until finally, something clear came through.

Hawk immediately recognized it as his CO's voice.

"Talon, this is Flight Leader," Major Erin Collins said, her voice strangely calm. "Are you receiving?"

Willis tapped his own COM fast. "Affirmative, Flight Leader. All due respect, but what the hell is going on? The COM's going wild and I've got all eyes on the surface right now, but I don't see â€" "

"Look up, Hawk."

The major did as she said and took in a sharp breath as he finally saw what was happening just above him in orbit. An enormous field of debris filled the space where the formidable \_Suave Affair\_ used to be, and the smaller \_Excalibur\_ was absent. He rapidly clicked a button on his console to change the display, and now saw green pinpricks of light above where Major Collins had deployed the remainder of her pilots. All three squadrons were in Broadwords, currently engaged against a large group of Seraphs just outside Khan's atmosphere.

Willis realized with growing trepidation that that could only mean one thing.

"Oh, fuck."

The words came out the moment he saw the Storm ship show up on his main screen, and suddenly a sour sense of dread settled in his stomach. No, he thought, almost desperate. No, please, not â€”

"The Suave Affair was just destroyed, Talon," Major Collins said then, giving voice to his fear. "Right after we launched."

Shit. "And the Ex?"

"Gone, but not in the way you think. The Storm ship went after the Affair first, and since it was already moderately damaged from our last run-in before we arrived, it didn't make it. The Ex did the sensible thing and jumped in the meantime. They knew if the Affair fell, they didn't stand a chance."

"Jesus," Hawk breathed. It may have been smart in some ways for the Excalibur to have taken to Slipstream to flee the chaos, but in doing so, it had left all the pilots and ground troops wide open to attack from the enemy vessel; Willis was sure that the Storm ship wasn't going to keep its assault isolated to space. And in that case, it was up to him and Victor and Kilo to keep the Marines dirtside safe.

That included his wife and his baby brother.

"What's going on with the ship now?" Hawk asked.

"It hasn't glassed the surface yet, so that's something," Collins replied. "So far it's just attacked our own boat and launched Seraphs."

For a second Major Hawk found that curious, too, but then he remembered something Natalie had said to him when they'd been billeted together at Outpost Columbia, before it had been overrun and largely demolished by the ex-Covies. She'd told him that there was a reason the Covenant hadn't glassed this half of Khan during the Human-Covenant War, and why they were so keen on having it now â€” the ruins. Willis knew the Remnant wouldn't risk permanently erasing their holy site just to get rid of the humans around it, so for that, at least, he felt relatively confident that the UNSC forces wouldn't get instantaneously barbecued anytime soon.

As for an all-out war on the surface for control of the place, however, Willis had no doubts that they could count on that.

"They're not going to stay up there for long," he murmured over the COM then.

"What was that?"

"The Storm," Hawk said louder, with conviction. "They're not up there to tango with you guys, and their biggest threat in orbit is gone now. They're going to head for the atmosphere."

Willis suddenly cursed under his breath at how patient and cunning

the Remnant had been. Three months the UNSC had been here, going back and forth from the Affair and the mainland and the island, and always the focus had been on the ruins and " as he'd recently found out himself " the threat posed by the portals inside. Instead, while everyone had been busy fretting over the backdoor, the Storm had apparently now decided to come in the traditional way. And they'd taken them all " including the Affair " by surprise.

"Collins, I'd suggest "

But she cut him off then with urgency in her voice. "Talon, watch it! They've just launched Banshees! The Phantoms aren't far behind! We'll try to get as many as we can up here but I'm warning you now that we're badly outnumbered! And we've still got those Seraphs to tackle!"

"On it!"

Major Hawk kicked his Pelican into gear then and switched COM channels, so that he was broadcasting to both his squadrons above the island " Kilo and Victor " as well as Cobra, who'd thankfully landed on the mainland just several minutes earlier to ferry down supplies.

"Kilo, Victor, and Cobra, this is Gold Leader," he said. "Some of you may have noticed that we've got company upstairs. The Affair is gone for good, and the Excalibur has momentarily jumped away to keep our cargo safe. The rest of the air wing is currently engaged in orbit, so that means it's up to us to provide the Marines on the ground with overhead support. We've got multiple Banshees and Phantoms inbound right now " ETA is six minutes. So let's get ready to rock."

In the brief interim, Willis checked all the status indicators on his craft, then his payload " he'd just rearmed and refueled a few days ago when he'd taken Cooper and the spook up to the Affair, so he had a full complement of missiles on board, as well as plenty of ammo for the heavy machine gun. After that, he checked the position of his squadrons relative to the incoming ex-Covie fighters and made sure they were all accounted for.

It was during the last minute before things really started to get crazy that he took a moment to press his gloved fingers against the family picture taped to his cockpit, as he always did. Natalie and their three kids smiled back at him.

Stay safe down there, Coop, he thought to himself. Gabe, Liam, and Liv, remember to wish Mommy and Daddy luck. We're going to need it.

A frightening number of Banshees swooped in on them a few seconds later, some moving to engage, others keeping on the flanks of several Phantoms as they escorted the larger crafts groundside to drop troops and vehicles. Willis knew that every one he let through would threaten his wife and little brother on Qamar, so he quickly pushed the controls of his Pelican harder and went after them.

"Cobra, focus on tagging the bastards making for the surface!" he cried over the radio while he maneuvered. "Kilo, you do the same, but try to stay above the ruins. Victor, let's move to counter, now! We



need these skies clear!"

There was one exception to the rule in Willis's orders, and that was his best friend and wingmate, Captain Brandon Heat. In a private channel to his friend, Hawk amended, "Snoopy, you're with me."

"Gotcha, Talon," came the near-instant reply. "Wouldn't want it any other way." Willis could hear the grin in his voice in the next words. "Without me around there'd be nobody to pull your ass out of the fire, \_sir\_. And if something happens to you, Natalie'll have \_my\_ ass. So â€" "

"So you have a vested interest in keeping me alive so you don't have to face my wife's wrath," Hawk finished with a slight smile of his own.

"Pretty much, Talon. Speaking of which, bogies at one!"

Willis had had his sights on them the entire time, waiting for the trio of Banshees to come into range before he hit the triggers on the missiles and launched. It was a dangerous move to make while the Storm craft were rocketing toward them, but that was the major's MO, always had been. It was how he'd made a name for himself as an ace pilot at a young age, and why he maintained that status now at thirty-one.

Cooper may have been good at leading, but Hawk was good at \_flying\_.

As soon as the missiles were away, the Banshees let out a flurry of plasma lances of their own, but Willis and his Pelican were already gone. Hawk hit the thrusters and went up, while Heat read his move and came in from the flank, strafing the lithe purple ships with his machine gun. One of them exploded in a fiery plume, catching the brunt of the Pelicans' joint assault. Another began trailing smoke as one of the missiles burst against its side. The third came out unscathed though, its pilot clearly more skilled than the others as the alien craft banked left to right to dodge the MG rounds, then went into a tight roll to avoid Hawk's missiles. Willis noticed and jerked the controls of his Pelican again, diving for the unharmed vessel with his own MG blazing. In the meantime, Heat zeroed in on the injured Banshee.

The second wave of the attack succeeded where the first didn't. Out of the corner of his eye on his console, Major Hawk saw the damaged Banshee his wingmate was after suddenly burst in midair while it attempted to maneuver away. Captain Heat let out a loud whoop over their private channel.

"\_Woo!\_ You see that, Talon? That's how it's done, baby!"

Willis smiled a little in his seat. "Nice hit, buddy! Now get after the rest. I got this last one."

"You sure, Tal?"

"I'm sure, Snoopy. Go."

"Roger that."

Hawk's determination to beat this clever Storm pilot increased as soon as his best friend left his six. This fight was going to be a matter of pride, one the major was anxious to win. He'd fought many talented Covenant pilots during the War, and even when the last Storm ship had attacked the \_Suave Affair\_ four days before they'd arrived over Khan. But this one was something special. He'd outmatched two seasoned human pilots so far with elaborate moves to keep from becoming an exploding pile of debris in the sky " and right now, he was giving Willis a run for his money, too.

Major Hawk grinned to himself and raced after the alien craft, enjoying the exhilarating feeling of the high-velocity chase flowing through his veins. It was the reason he'd always loved flying...and a good dogfight.

"All right, you bastard," he said aloud then. "Let's dance."

The first of Willis's MG rounds went right below the ex-Covie's Banshee, missing the fuselage by a hair. Hawk cursed but pushed on, adjusting his aim as he followed his alien counterpart into a barrel roll with weapons close to overheating. Finally a burst hit, and soon the Banshee in front of him was trailing smoke from a wing, just like the other had. The major's smile momentarily widened as he readied his missiles and frantically jerked his craft from starboard to port to get a lock.

But then the Banshee suddenly disappeared.

"What the hell?" Willis screwed up his face in confusion beneath his helmet, searching the skies with his eyes as well as electronics for the bogie. For a moment he wondered if the Storm had learned some tricks from the ever-elusive Prometheans recently, but then it hit him: the pilot had rolled up out of sight instead of sideways to throw him off. It was what Hawk himself would've done in that position.

\_You're good, but not good enough, my friend,\_ Major Hawk thought with a smirk. \_Your ass is mine now.\_

Hawk rolled his Pelican hard to port and yanked the controls up a second later, ending up just behind and to the left of the alien pilot. He liked to imagine that the ex-Covie son of a bitch's eyes went wide inside the Banshee as Willis got a lock and sent his newly armed complement of missiles after it, but of course he couldn't be sure of that. The major then dove back down and out of the way, and waited for the fireworks to go off.

He didn't have to wait long. A sudden detonation above him sent a shockwave rushing across his Pelican, and he had to maintain a white-knuckle grip on the controls to keep his craft level through the blast. When it was over, though, Hawk was happier than a kid on Christmas morning.

\_I still got it,\_ he thought smugly to himself. \_That'll give the rest of those alien bastards something to think about.\_ He glanced upward toward the battle going on in orbit, too. \_I hope Collins is giving them hell up there.\_

Willis turned his attention back to his own surroundings then and

noticed Captain Heat coming back alongside his wing. His best friend's voice was full of excitement.

"Damn! That was some fancy flying, Talon!"

"You know it! Better watch it, though. We got more coming up on our tail."

It was the first time since the skirmish began that Hawk was able to get a good look at his display and see how his pilots were faring around him. His amped up feeling from the adrenaline rush began to diminish when he saw just how many Banshees they had left to take on. They were positively swarming the skies above the island now.

Some had even managed to get through. They were attacking the ground now as they provided cover for their Phantoms to land.

Slowly, Major Hawk's smugness started to turn to anxious fear again. Natalie was down there, and so was Matthew. This was no time to play games. He clicked his COM. "Kilo, Victor, Cobra, this is Gold Leader. We need to step it up! Let's make sure no more Phantoms touch dirt, is that clear?"

Acknowledgment lights winked green across his display, but he found that the worry remained. Deep down, he already knew that all his pilots were doing their very best; they knew what was at stake here. But sometimes, as he'd just found out himself now, even your very best wasn't enough.

The major momentarily had a flashback to the start of the battle for Earth nearly six years ago now. He remembered fighting the Covenant bastards in orbit when they'd first shown up over the human homeworld, and the helplessness he'd felt as he'd watched them destroy the orbital defense platform Athens Station right in front of him, despite the tough fight he and his squadron had put up. Somehow the Covenant had managed to overwhelm them and bypass their defenses to get to their true objective "and now, the Remnant was doing the same thing here.

When he clicked his COM this time, it was to open up a private channel between himself and his wife. Though he had no doubt that the Marines on the ground could see what was happening for themselves by now, he still felt a burning need to warn Cooper of what was coming.

"Colonel, this is Talon in the skies," Willis said then over the radio. "Be advised, you've got Banshees and Phantoms incoming. I repeat, Banshees and Phantoms inbound."

Please be careful, Coop, he thought to himself. For me, and for our boys and our little girl back home.

## 18. Chapter 17: High Tide

Author's Note: Whew! It's been for friggin' ever, right? Well, thank you all for your patience as I've dealt with a number of pretty big real life things since returning home, and here's the next chapter as a belated Christmas present. Hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

## ><p><span><strong>Chapter Seventeen: High Tide<strong>

\_This is where you earn your pay, Cooper.\_

I could almost hear the late Oliver Hayden's words in my head as the world came undone around me. If I hadn't been in Kenya five years ago at the close of the Human-Covenant War, facing both the Flood and the Covies with shrapnel wounds in my right arm and nothing but pistol ammo left in my clip, I would have thought this looked like the Apocalypse. As it was, this was a damn good impression.

Seeing all that we were going up against now, it didn't even surprise me when a hot lance of boiling plasma impacted the sandy dirt several meters away. I turned back to face the wide-eyed Marines who'd gathered around me.

"Don't just stand there, Marines! Let's move! You want to get out of here alive, we fight back! \_Now!\_"

Of course, that was easier said than done at this point. Despite all the measures I'd put in place against it, the Storm had caught us with our pants down, truly - and the ship we'd called home for the last few months, the \_Suave Affair\_, was gone. It was a miracle we hadn't all been glassed out of existence by now, too - though one glance up at the sky was enough to wish we had been. It would've been a quicker, cleaner death than what we faced now.

\_Stop it, Cooper,\_ I thought to myself. None of these thoughts were helping. Taking action would.

Another loud \_whoosh\_ came from above then, and I looked up to see a Banshee swooping in low at us, on the attack. Gripping my DMR tight against my chest, I shouted, "Marines, hit the deck! Banshee coming in hot!"

The group around me and I threw ourselves onto the tan dirt of the island and promptly covered our heads with our arms in the open, just in time as the enemy craft made its run. More large lances struck the ground, sizzling as they left smoking black craters in the ground. I heard several screams go out behind us - Marines who hadn't been as fast or as lucky as us. They were vaporized in an instant, caught up in the tightly directed conflagration that was plasma. Having been struck by it myself before, I shivered at the sounds.

And then a few seconds later I was back on my feet, pushing myself up from the dirt, weapon in hand. I was upset at the loss of a handful of my troops, but in a full-on invasion like this, I knew I couldn't expect to come out with no casualties. And I still had two whole battalions of men left to protect.

So even in the midst of the hellfire around me, I opened a COM channel to both the 8th Engineers and the 904th Infantry, hoping to turn things around as fast as I possibly could. "Everyone listen up! This is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper! Major Warfield, right now this is your show! Get your Marines assembled and let's get our defenses going! Heavy weapons up front! Tag as many of those damn Banshees as you can! Sharpshooters, watch for incoming Phantoms landing troops and nail 'em when they jump out! 'Hogs and tankers, move!"

I wasn't expecting much of a reply from the major, but the simple grunt he gave over the COM at my orders was even less than that. For some reason he still seemed to have a bone to pick with me, but obviously at the moment that was the absolute least of my worries. So long as he followed my commands and did his utmost to keep his men alive and repel the oncoming Remnant soldiers, that was enough for me.

"Harris, I need your men on the move, too!" I continued, bringing my rifle up now and looking through the sights for targets. "Leave two squads by the entrance to the ruins to guard the scientists and that's it! We need all hands on deck for this and I can't risk pulling any squadron off their flight right now to get us reinforcement!"

Being Marines we all understood Navy lingo as well, and presently that seemed most appropriate. Seeing the amount of traffic in the air above us, I knew Willis wasn't going to be able to spare anyone to go get us Major Brewer's battalion from our staging area on the mainland. At least for the moment, we were going to have to brave all this on our own - and worry about getting additional troops and supplies out here later. If we survived.

I ducked then as another Banshee came hurtling in overhead, lighting up a good chunk of Qamar with superheated green orbs of energy that pounded mercilessly into the dirt, sending up geysers of brown sand around us. This time, though, it was answered by a huge kaboom coming from the 904th's attached Scorpion tank. Two quick shots within seconds of each other somehow found their mark as the alien craft flew low, the first making it spark blue and white, the second completely obliterating it out of the sky. I grinned wide momentarily as a few of the Marines beside me whooped loud, only to find my heart sink again when my radio crackled.

It was my husband.

"Colonel, this is Talon in the skies. Be advised, you've got Banshees and Phantoms incoming. I repeat, Banshees and Phantoms inbound."

His words were strangely calm, but in his own way I could tell that what he was seeing up there had him anxious. I knew part of it was fear for my safety, and his brother's, but the rest was probably just what we were all feeling - something between stark terror and adrenaline. Our ship in orbit had just been destroyed, and now the Storm were on our asses en masse. Not the kind of fun most of us were into.

I'd been expecting an attack like this from the ruins. Instead, they'd come in from right where we'd decided not to look. Even after all these years of fighting them, it seemed the ex-Covies still managed to pull out some surprises once in a while - or maybe, more often than not.

As the other Banshees' cannon rounds kept hitting the ground around me, I replied to Willis, "Thanks, Talon! We know!"

I suddenly found myself having to sprint now to keep ahead of the strikes - same as Warfield's Marines around me. The Storm were hitting us damn hard right out of the gate, with everything they had.

Up here on the open ridge of the island, with very little cover, that was the worst possible place to get caught. We needed our air support to take out more of the enemy before they had a chance to bomb us, or we were going to get liquified pretty fast.

Mixed with that somber knowledge was worry for Willis, and his pilots. But the truth of it was that if they didn't help, we'd be dead soon.

"Major, we need those ships off our tail!"

"Hold on, Cooper! We're working on it! The whole damn dome is full of them!"

"Get more support! From the \_Ex\_!"

"The \_Ex\_ jumped, Natalie! We're all you've got!"

"Son of a \_bitch!\_"

That was the moment I wondered how any of this could get any worse. The only thing we needed now was another assault from the Prometheans teleporting out of the ruins or wherever the hell they were coming from, and have the human rebels on the mainland get after our reserve battalion there at the same time. Then this whole coordinated circus of "kill the UNSC Marines" would be complete.

Again, I had to remind myself that these thoughts weren't helping. So instead I pulled out the last ace we had up our sleeve - a new arrival from the \_Excalibur\_, and something I'd insisted on being brought to Qamar directly from the ship on the first day. One of them, in any case.

"Mantis-one, this is Colonel Cooper," I said over the COM then, taking in lungfuls of air at a time as my boots pounded the dirt. "Is your apparatus ready?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the operator returned. "Tell me where to set this bad boy up and I'll start wreaking havoc, Colonel."

I wanted to snort but it wasn't possible with all the oxygen I needed for running at the moment. "Aim your guns up, Captain. That should do the trick."

"Understood, ma'am. On it."

Checking out the view on my HUD as I ran, I saw the Mantis wasn't too far away from me - a little further behind and to the left. I heard it begin to stomp around, then just as quick start to let loose a barrage of machine gun fire - all targeted at the sky.

"Yeah!" the captain shouted. "Bring 'em on!"

The loud rattling noise of the heavy weapon was nearly drowned out by everything else going on - dogfights in the air, bombardments on the ground, Storm troops being disembarked on the island at an alarming rate. Every so often I could hear the sharp \_cracks\_ of sniper rifles going off from somewhere on my six, backing us up as the rest of us charged headlong into the battle. It probably wasn't the best of strategies, but right now it was all we had - and I had a feeling

that the Mantis was about to make up a good portion of the difference.

The rattling continued as we ran, lungs heaving and adrenaline pumping, towards the nearest Phantom that had just let off another dozen ex-Covenant onto the ridge. I had my gun up already and was ready to fire, but I couldn't use my scope while I sprinted. Instead I squeezed out an only partially aimed burst, one right after the next, and saw one of the Grunts drop to the sand in a messy spray of blood. Pretty impressive for the distance and the lack of a steady target, but what the Mantis did was so much more.

As an M41 rocket streaked through the air at the departing Phantom from one of our heavy weapons Marines, the Mantis behind us targeted the bulky troop carrier too. In seconds the rocket hit, blowing off a good chunk of the alien craft's purple armor on its flank, while the Mantis's machine gun drilled away at the rest. The Phantom was already sparking a heartbeat later, until a final rocket - from the Mantis this time - finished the job in a brilliant detonation just above us.

The force of the shockwave picked me up off my feet and sent me and several other still-running Marines straight into the dirt on our backs. I could only hope it'd done the same to our newly landed enemy.

But right now, even that didn't make its way into my top five concerns just yet.

Oxygen completely escaped my lungs when I hit the ground, like a giant hand had just beaten it right out of my chest cavity from behind. I tried to groan from the sudden impact but couldn't, head swimming for the longest of moments as my body seemed to ache in every place and my lungs burned. When my vision finally resolved into something recognizable - and while I desperately sucked in my first breath in what felt like minutes - I saw a familiar face in front of me.

"Ma'am? Colonel Cooper? You all right?"

The first time I tried to speak sent me into a brief coughing fit. I hadn't realized in the moment that so much sandy dirt had been kicked up around us in the blast. Finally, I replied hoarsely, "Yeah. Yeah, Josh. I'm okay."

Holding his SAW loosely in his lap while he crouched next to me, the staff sergeant gave me a look. "Sure?"

I coughed again, still trying to clear my lungs of the crap in the air. "Jesus...Christ, Porter. All that's left of the damn Storm in the galaxy appear to've just arrived on our doorstep, and you're worried about me?"

"Ma'am, I just - "

"I said I'm good. Let's go."

I picked myself up off the ground now that I could breathe normally and brought my DMR rapidly to bear again, looking for the alien targets that had just emerged from the Phantom we'd shot down.

Meanwhile, I could hear the Mantis and rocket teams still doing their jobs behind us, deterring anymore Banshees from swooping in too low for the time being. That, at least, was a relief that was especially welcome - and it helped out my husband and his squadrons as well. I'd have to ask Willis again soon about their status upstairs - although I supposed that was plenty apparent from the way things were going down here.

"Shit, Colonel. I never would've expected this - even though I really should have," a voice to my right said then. I turned and saw Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd jogging up beside me, his battle rifle in his grasp. "\_Dammit.\_ I was so stupid. And now the \_Affair\_ is totally gone - "

Sparing the ONI operative a glance, I replied, "Don't beat yourself up too much, Cal. The blame lies with me, too - and every other senior officer aboard both ships who didn't even think of the possibility. We were so damn focused on the portals and those new Promethean bastards that we didn't even stop to realize the Storm might just pop back in the old-fashioned way."

"I just...I'm a spook, ma'am. This is my job, to account for everything beforehand, to know how and when to strike first and best against the enemy. I guess the novelty of what we found down there, in the ruins...it really distracted all of us."

"Yup. Hell of a tactic the Remnant bastards chose to employ." And dammit if it hadn't worked.

The talked ceased then as we both chose to let our guns do it for us, aiming at the oncoming rush of Storm troops left behind without support by the sudden explosion of their Phantom up above. But I knew that that brief window of good luck wouldn't last long, even with the Mantis still loudly stomping across the island ridge. As much of a badass machine of utter destruction it was, there was still only one of it, and tens of continuously incoming Banshees and Phantoms to take out.

After sinking one last burst into a shield-covered Jackal, dropping it quick from the slight indentation on the side of its shield, I keyed the COM again to my Marines. "Heavy weapons, don't stop firing! Keep reloading and aim for the skies! Tankers, head on a swivel! Support the ground troops and blast the air when you've got a close-range target coming in hot! Mantis-one, do your thing! Everyone else is back-up!"

Acknowledgment lights winked green across my HUD as I ducked to reload, the spent clip hot in my hands from how fast I'd fired it off. I tossed the used magazine away and pulled out a fresh one from my web belt, slamming it home and cocking the rifle just in time to catch an Elite in my sights.

The alien looked about ready to go off on one of my Marines, a corporal up at point with his two dead fireteam members beside him. The young serviceman looked to be injured, cradling his side as he tried to sit up from the ground, failed, and settling for pointing his sidearm at the tall ex-Covie. He got off at least half a dozen rounds, but even at that range, the bullets did little more than cause the Elite's translucent shield to shimmer.



In a panic as I brought up my own gun on the alien, I shouted, "Porter! Back that Marine up, \_now!\_"

"Yes, ma'am! On it!"

Together we rattled off a series of bursts, Staff Sergeant Porter moving in closer even as he sprayed a barrage of lead at the Elite. Its shields sputtered and failed in seconds against the onslaught, and with a final burst of gunfire from my DMR, the thing was toast. The formidable alien dropped to the dirt with a dying warble, its armor riddled with bullet holes and deep purple blood streaming from nearly all of them. I decided it might've been a little overkill on my part - but if it resulted in saving the life of one of my men, it was worth it.

I keyed my COM a third time as soon as the encounter was over.

"Corpsman up! Doc, get your ass over here on the double, we've got a Marine down who needs help!"

I ran over to the wounded corporal as I spoke, reaching him soon after Porter did. My aide crouched down beside him, much as he'd done a few minutes ago with me, and put a hand to his shoulder.

"Josh, it's okay. I got this," I said. "Watch our six, there's still a shitload of ex-Covies dropping in."

"Yes, ma'am."

Quickly dropping to one knee myself as I held my DMR tight against my middle with one hand, I leaned towards the injured Marine with the other and looked him over. There didn't seem to be much blood, but something was clearly causing him a world of pain. "Where're you hurt, Corporal?"

"My leg, ma'am," he responded tightly. Then he winced. "I screwed it up coming after this dude - " He indicated the Elite. " - and next thing I know, my ass is in the sand and I can't get up. I think it's broke."

"Could be, Marine." I squeezed his shoulder, relieved he was going to be okay and didn't seem to have anything life-threatening going on. I'd lost too many already, and this was only the start. "Sit tight, I've got Doc coming for you."

The corporal winced again. "I will, ma'am."

I remained crouched beside the young non-com for another moment, but turned my attention to everything going on around me instead. Storm craft were still coming in from seemingly everywhere up above, deploying more troops and dodging heavy ordnance from both the tanks, rockets, 'Hogs, and Mantis on the ground, as well as our squadrons up in the air. Once on the island's surface, Marines and Remnant troops fought for control at each point of contact, engaging in fierce clashes with weapons fire that enveloped the landscape...when the screams of those getting hit or seared alive didn't bleed through.

Like I said, damn good impression of the Apocalypse.

I shut my eyes tight for a second as I crouched there and took in a deep breath, trying to shut out all the noise so I could think. The battle for Qamar was far from over; I knew these were just the opening shots. It was going to take a lot more bullets and blood to get things stable again. And the destruction of the \_Affair\_ was a loss I couldn't even begin to wrap my head around just yet, let alone think of the long-term ramifications of being without it forever and having the \_Excalibur\_ disappear on us, too. The situation here had suddenly become about as dire as they came.

But I knew we had to keep fighting - to hold Qamar, to keep the scientists safe, to keep the civvies on the mainland from dealing with this.

And to survive.

## 19. Chapter 18: Landing Zone

**\*\*Chapter Eighteen: Landing Zone\*\***

\*\*\*\*Four and a Half Years Earlier. 0631 Hours, November 26, 2553.  
\*\*\*\*UNSC Roosevelt Air Base, Skagen, Denmark.\*\*\*\* "The Paradigm Shift," Planet Earth. \*\*\*\*Eight Months After the Human-Covenant War's End\*\*\*\*

"Honey, have you seen my cover?"

Willis was standing in the bathroom of their new two-bedroom apartment on base, a welcome change of housing from the single-room barracks they'd had to live in for a few months when the war had ended. At least now they'd been moved to something more manageable for a family of three - soon to be \_five\_ - but even this wasn't permanent. Cooper had informed him yesterday that her new orders had finally come down - the first they'd had since the whole nightmarish war against the Covenant and Flood had come to a close eight months ago.

Much to her dismay but no real surprise, she'd found out her whole unit was getting dismantled soon. In three more months the 603rd Infantry Regiment would be no more, let alone the 102nd Battalion she was a part of; and instead of being a company commander for Bravo as she had been for well over a year now, she'd be getting transferred to the 8th Engineer Battalion to help with the post-war reconstruction efforts already underway across the planet.

Now that the hostilities were finally over, there was a much higher premium on those with engineering backgrounds than those with infantry experience. Cooper had both so the brass were eager to send her on her way.

For his part, Willis's request to transfer with Natalie to Florida, where her new unit was based, had yet to be approved, but he had little worry so far that it wouldn't. Bases everywhere needed a pilot, and with no war going on anymore and his wife four months pregnant with twins, he figured the chances of their family being split up were small. Cooper didn't seem to think the same though, so she spent most of her free moments fretting over the possibility while Hawk tried his best to keep her calm with reassurances.

This wasn't one of those times, however. At the moment, both of their immediate concerns were getting ready for another hectic workday, and making sure they were dressed and out the door on time along with their three-and-a-half-year-old son Gabe.

Willis finally glanced up from buttoning his uniform jacket in front of the mirror and yelled back to Cooper, "On the dresser, Coop! In the bedroom!"

"Thanks!"

The young captain shook his head to himself, a small smile on his face. It was true what they said about pregnant women - they were awfully forgetful.

Because of the war, Willis hadn't been around much at all during Natalie's past two pregnancies - one that had only recently ended in a painful miscarriage neither liked to talk about. So this was going to be his first time fully involved in his new children's lives from start to finish. If the transfer worked out.

\_It will,\_ Hawk reminded himself. \_We spent six years mostly apart because of those Covenant bastards during the damn war. I'm going to make sure I get to spend the rest of my days in peace now with my family, no matter what strings I might have to pull to get that to happen. We earned this.\_

Moving into the bedroom himself now to pull on his boots, Willis frowned when he walked in. It looked like Natalie had found her cover to go along with her fatigues, barely able to hide the noticeable bulge now, but she hadn't walked out the door yet. Instead she held the camouflage hat between her hands as she sat on the edge of the bed, listless.

"Natalie? What's wrong?"

He heard her swallow. "Nothing, Will. It's just...everything's been happening so fast lately. I don't - "

Standing over her, he reached down and took one of her hands in his, giving it a light squeeze. "Hey. It'll be okay. I know there's a lot going on right now, but we'll be fine." He chuckled faintly. "We survived the war for God's sake. That's something. And we'll all be together when the time comes for you to leave, all right? I promise. Don't worry about it so much, Coop."

"It's not that." She swallowed again. "I mean, I think about that a lot too, but I meant...am I the only one having a hard time believing this is real? That after nearly thirty years of war, the Covenant are really done with us?"

Hawk let out a sigh this time and turned to sit beside her on their bed. "It's a lot for all of us to take in, Cooper. You're not the only one who feels that way. But yeah, from what I can tell, this is it. I know it's hard for people like us to fathom, but we live in a time of peace now. It's been eight months. The Covies aren't coming back." He squeezed her hand again and smiled. "We're finally free, Coop. We made it."

Cooper frowned. "Then why do I sometimes feel like it's not?"

"It was a long war, honey. Hell, when we were born it was already going on, and we're nearing twenty-seven now. It's the only reality we've ever known. It'll take some time to get used to that. But we can finally move on now, without fear of more attacks."

"I guess. But they're still out there, Will. Maybe not the Covenant, but the species that were a part of it. How long until they figure they've got no reason to leave us alone anymore?"

Willis reminded himself to be patient. They'd been through a lot, and his wife was pregnant. It was natural for her to worry to the point of exasperation sometimes.

She was still having nightmares almost nightly, most often about her best friend's death on the Tsavo Highway when they'd fought in Africa. She'd only just fully recovered from her wounds sustained there. Physically things were fine, but mentally, Willis knew she was still a work in progress. Both of them were. Most of humanity was. Shit, they'd just narrowly escaped extinction as a species.

He'd never figured a concept like "peace" would be something so hard to get used to.

They were Marines. Fighting was ingrained, an instinct. Now that there was no war anymore, there was plenty of doubt and uncertainty about the future that lay ahead for them.

Still, it was his job to keep her from dwelling on these things. This time instead of squeezing her hand, he leaned over and kissed her full on the lips. She kissed him back.

"Natalie, we'll be fine. Gabriel will be fine. The babies will be fine, and we're not getting split up. Okay?"

Slowly, she nodded. "Okay."

"And the Covenant aren't coming after us again. I can guarantee you that. It's truly, finally over now."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Present Day. 145<strong>4 Hours, February 19, 2558.  
<strong><strong><strong><strong><strong>Qamar Island  
Ruins,<strong><strong> Planet Khan<strong>\*\*. "The Edge," Outer  
Colonies.\*\*\*\*\* Day One of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*\*\*

From the looks of it, things weren't going much better on the ground now than in the air.

For some reason, it was that moment that Hawk thought back to an old, brief conversation he'd had with Natalie a few years ago. His assertions that the Covenant - in any form - would never come back to haunt them suddenly rang hollow in his ears. At the time, he'd truly believed that. With time, Cooper had come to believe it as well. Now that the Storm were a constant thorn in their side out here in the Outer Colonies, however, he often thought how naïve he'd been to ever think that way.

\_Come on, you alien bastards,\_ he thought to himself now as he went into a series of evasive maneuvers in his ship. \_Come and get it.\_

Pushing on the controls hard, the major sent his Pelican boosting forward, forcing it out of a tight roll he'd just used to avoid the two Banshees pursuing him. He'd thought things up here were bad before, but it looked like the action in the air was only getting thicker now. He wondered briefly if the Storm ship in orbit had launched more fighters. \_Shit, I hope not,\_ he thought. \_That'd be just what we need right now.\_

"Talon, dip low! I got 'im!"

Without thinking, Hawk immediately did as he was told, violently jerking the controls down so that his Pelican momentarily rushed closer to the planet's surface. He got to a point where he could make out individual moving dots - fellow Marines on the ground - and had to deftly dodge the friendly fire aimed at the Remnant crafts. Still, he didn't pull up again until he got the all-clear from his wingmate.

"Hell yes! Bogie down, sir," Captain Heat shouted over the COM. "Now the odds are two against one. I'm liking that."

Inside his own cockpit, Willis frowned. "I'm sure you do, Snoopy, but I'd really like it if I didn't have to keep flying fancy for you. Let's get this last Storm pilot out of the way and try to get back to helping the ground troops. Looks to me like they aren't faring much better down there than us."

"You're no fun, Tal, but I understand. On it."

Major Hawk continued his maneuvers as the second Banshee proved it was still alive and kicking behind him. He had his console screaming at him to avoid the oncoming lances of plasma it launched, as well as the friendly ordnance the Marines on the surface were sending up in an attempt to help. Rockets streaked through the air after the Banshee, narrowly missing it. Up ahead, Willis could see one of the Scorpion tanks attached to one of his wife's battalions, too - and further in the distance yet closing fast, Cooper's crown jewel from the recent supply drop from the \_Excalibur\_. A Mantis.

Despite the situation, that made Hawk grin. \_Not doing so bad after all, huh, Coop,\_ he thought. \_Better than us at least. Keep it up.\_

It was easy to tell the new equipment only helped so much, however. Natalie's Marines were still clearly in dire need of more support from Willis's squadrons in the air. The major pushed hard again to try to get that to happen. He had to.

"Snoopy, how are you doing on that lock?"

"I'm close! Bastard keeps jolting out of the way at the last minute. Strafing!"

"Careful not to hit - !"

Hawk inadvertently moved up then at the same time the Banshee behind

him moved down, forcing Captain Heat's shots to miss the target completely. What his wingmate hit instead was the back of Willis's own damn Pelican. And he felt it good.

Willis grunted as he was thrown forward suddenly inside the craft, only the heavy harness keeping him strapped tight against his seat. Pain rippled through his chest at the pull, but he managed to retain control of the Pelican and growl over the COM in response. Thankfully they'd only been rounds from the machine gun, something the Pelican's hull was well-prepared to handle. Still, it had been jarring nonetheless and left the craft a little vulnerable.

"Dammit, Heat! What the hell did I just say?"

"Sorry, T. Jesus, you know I didn't mean to - fuck. He's coming back around!"

"Get after him!"

Luckily for both human pilots, the Banshee didn't last long after that. Just as Willis's best friend was going in for the kill, another rocket launched up in the sky, hitting the alien target dead-on while somehow avoiding the two friendlies going after it. A mean feat from a skilled heavy weapons Marine. That threw the Storm pilot off its course, twisting suddenly to the right with sparks trailing its tail - and that was enough for Heat to finish it off.

The enemy aircraft went up a moment later in a burst of electric sparks and flames.

"Nailed him! You see that, Talon?"

"I did. Nice work picking at the leftovers, Snoopy."

"Aw, come on, man! I said I was sor - "

Willis chuckled over the radio. "You'll be more sorry when Cooper finds out one of your shots hit my bird. You could've killed me you dope."

There was a brief pause before Captain Heat's voice came back, sounding agitated. "\_Shit. \_You wouldn't. Natalie will bite my head off, you know that, right?"

"Sure do, buddy. That's punishment for you."

"Aw, hell."

The smug grin remained on the major's face for a moment after that before he realized what it was he'd noticed before - the sudden influx of activity. It wasn't more Storm pilots being deployed from the enemy ship upstairs. It was that many of the Phantoms that had made it to the surface to unload troops were coming \_back\_.

"T, you seeing what I'm seeing? Those damn aliens heading up to the garage?"

"Yeah."

"They rearming and refueling or what?"

"Don't know, Snoopy. But I hope to hell they're not planning on going back down with more troops."

They couldn't have more in that ship, Willis reasoned. The entire island was already crawling with them. Frankly, he wasn't sure the friendlies on the ground could take any more on. \_I have to warn Natalie about this,\_ he thought to himself. \_Just in case. Let's hope this doesn't turn into more of an impossible situation than it already is.\_

He'd already keyed his COM to talk to her when something hard knocked into the Pelican's starboard side. Even strapped in, Hawk's helmet bounced off the side of the bulkhead, temporarily forcing him unconscious. When he came to, red alarms blared at him from his console, and he could taste copper in his mouth.

Instinctively, he knew what was happening. \_I've been here before,\_ he thought. \_I'm going down.\_

"Talon!" his best friend's voice yelled into their shared channel. "What are you doing, man?\_ Pull up!"\_

The sudden hit had come from a large piece of debris that had burst off the front of another Pelican just beside the major's. Not Heat's from the sound of it. The loose chunk of thick metal dug right into the craft's weakened section and sent it spiraling to the ground.

\_I wish I could, buddy,\_ Hawk thought as his mind spun. It was getting harder and harder to think now, but he knew he had to. There was something important he needed to do. Something that might save Cooper. \_But what was it?\_

He never got the chance to remember. All in a rush the plummeting feeling in his gut stopped, and then the rest of the world ceased to exist.

## 20. Chapter 19: A Hard Road Ahead

**\*\*Chapter Nineteen: A Hard Road Ahead\*\***

\*\*\*\*1416\*\* Hours, February 19, 2558. \*\*\*\*\*Qamar Island Ruins,\*\*\*\* Planet Khan\*\*\*\*. "The Deep End," Outer Colonies.\*\*\*\*\* Day One of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*\*\*\*

Some of the worst parts of the fighting so far wasn't the actual combat itself. It was having to keep a sharp eye on what was going on above us, too, to make sure we didn't have huge alien and human vessels alike dropping in on top of us in the middle of the fray. From the looks of things both sides were getting hit hard, with Banshees and Phantoms being blown out of the sky just as often as our Pelicans were. Through it all, though, I worried endlessly about Willis, but I knew that if I were to keep my head in the game - and I had to, for the sake of my Marines - I needed to trust that he wouldn't put himself in any compromising positions. He was a seasoned pilot and was well aware of what he had to do. I had my part to play as well and that was that.

"Keep at it, Marines!" I shouted over the COM then, pausing in the

center of the chaos to rally my battalions. "Hit 'em with everything you've got and we'll beat 'em back!"

With all that was going on at the moment, that seemed more like wishful thinking than anything else. Making sure morale didn't plummet in the midst of a full-scale invasion was important, though. We couldn't afford to lose faith in our ability to win this thing - or at least get out of it - or we'd be toast.

Coming up beside me then, Staff Sergeant Porter let off a long rattle from his SAW before ducking down against a hastily set-up barricade - a large chunk of a downed Banshee, still smoking - to reload.

"Colonel, it's not looking too good right now!" he shouted above the din. "That Mantis has been a big help, ma'am, but until our air support gets free of those Storm bastards upstairs, we're too vulnerable on the ground!"

"Roger that, Staff! What about our heavy ordnance? The Scorpions?"

"Same thing across the lines, ma'am! We're holding our own for now, but there's a lot more enemy troops to burn through!"

I snorted, looking through the sight on my scope. "Yeah. No kidding."

Before Porter had a chance to reply I caught a wounded Elite in my crosshairs. His right shoulder was bleeding profusely, spewing violet blood as he limped forward, attempting to charge a group of Warfield's Marines further up ahead. I made the stubborn bastard think twice by drilling him in the chest with three rapid bursts from my DMR. After that, one more shot from the Marines closer to him did him in and he dropped to his knees, clutching his bloody middle before falling dead in the dirt.

For some reason the alien's display of courage even in the face of sure death made me think of Atalom 'Kuatee, the Elite I'd fought with near the end of the Human-Covenant War, who'd somehow taught me a lot about my enemy even while teaching me a lot about myself. The tall Remnant warrior I'd just helped kill reminded me of his kin that I'd formed an uneasy truce with, and later a grudging mutual respect for. It was the first time in a long while that I remembered that the sect of ex-Covies we were fighting now were different from those we'd fought before. And yet, many similarities remained.

\_That son of a bitch wasn't brave like 'Kuatee, though, I chided myself. \_Just blinded by his own religious doctrine, and too caught up in whatever dogma they believe in to view death as something to be avoided. \_They could've just left us alone like the rest and this mission to Khan would've been wrapped up by now.\_

Wrapped up before the Prometheans had suddenly appeared, that was. \_Christ, I hope they don't get woken up by all this, too.\_

When I'd finally burned through the last of my ammo, I pressed my back tight against the hunk of Banshee and rummaged quickly in my pockets for a fresh magazine. I came up with one out of my remaining three. I was going to need to gear up again very soon - and



fast.

"Porter!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Get me the nearest location of a supply crate tagged on the map and sent to my HUD! I'm almost out!"

"On it, Colonel!"

"And get ready - I'm going to need an escort!"

"Acknowledged!"

Not that I wanted one for myself, but I knew if I dropped dead now that that would only make the dire circumstances worse. We'd already lost our most formidable asset in orbit, the Suave Affair, and our new arrival had pretty much disappeared. No doubt the Excalibur was waiting for things to calm down before attempting a return.

And judging by what was going on right now, I didn't blame them. But one more serious toll on the command structure of the unit, and things would be looking very bleak.

"Josh, what's my ETA?"

"Ten minutes out, ma'am! Location is now tagged to your HUD, as ordered. Ready to go when you are."

I burst out of cover then, gripping my rifle tight against my shoulder, and let loose a series of rounds. "All right. Let's go!"

Together we hauled ass to the point where the marker was set in our helmet's electronics, all the while praying that something wasn't going to come barreling out of nowhere to pick us off. By the end of the run-and-gun, my left arm - where a rebel bullet had grazed me when I'd gone to visit Mayor Javier Laraza on the mainland - was burning, pain spiking through the still-healing wound. I did what I always did and ignored it, continuing on.

When we finally reached the marker I took just a split-second to admire the fact that we were both still alive and unscathed, then set to work cracking open the box.

"What do we have here, Staff?" I asked him while I delved inside.

"An assortment of ammunition and some grenades, ma'am. I checked the listings on my datapad first to confirm this crate had what you needed."

"Very prudent, Porter. Thanks."

"No problem, Colonel."

The staff sergeant stood by with his SAW aimed outward while I fished for the equipment I'd come for. I found what I needed rather quickly and stuffed the extra ammo into my pockets, glancing up only when I

noticed a new figure approaching out of the corner of my eye. Porter lowered his weapon a bit, and I saw that it was Major Shawn Harris, my former battalion XO, now in charge of the 8th Engineers himself.

I grinned in relief that he was okay. "Hey, Harris. How're you holding up?"

The dark-skinned major shook his head. "Same as everyone else I guess, ma'am. You?"

"Oh, you know. Can't complain. Just came to grab more bullets to sink into those bastards."

Despite the utter chaos around us, Harris chuckled. "Right."

"What about the rest of your battalion, Shawn? The scientists?"

"I gave orders to the squads guarding them to give me continuous updates. As of two minutes ago the scientists are still free from the engagement and out of harm's way." His eyes clouded for a moment. "Wish I could say the same for the Eighth, but we're putting up a good fight, Colonel."

"So are Warfield's boys." I let out a heavy sigh. "I hate to say it, but I think the best we can hope for right now is staying even."

"Yes, ma'am."

Surprising both of us, Staff Sergeant Porter chimed in then. "I bet that's going to help."

"What?" I asked.

"The Phantoms, ma'am. Look. They're heading back."

Glancing up at the sky, I turned to see that Porter was right. All the Storm's Phantoms - those still functioning at least, damaged or not - were suddenly boosting back into the atmosphere, away from the fight on the ground.

"No shit," Harris breathed. "So that means either they lost a lot more of those things than they wanted to..."

"Or they're done disembarking troops and are going back up for more." I laid my newly-reloaded rifle on top of the crate. Hard. "Fuck."

"Ma'am, if I may, I don't know if that's possible," my aide cut in. "An ex-Covie ship that size can't account for much more than what's already been added to the fight. I think those Phantoms are just cutting their losses and heading back for good."

The major frowned. "You think the Mantis spooked them, Staff?"

"I think we all did, sir."

I snorted a second time. "I sure hope you're right, Josh. To be honest, we could really use a break in their attack. Give our flyboys

up there a fighting chance, maybe even have a few sneak off to go get our battalion in the wings."

"Yes, ma'am. Orders, Colonel?" Major Harris asked.

"Same as before, Shawn. Keep the bastards as far away from the ruins as you can, and keep whittling them down." Pressing both hands against my DMR on the crate, I braced myself and added, "Only change I want now is to keep a better eye on what's going on upstairs. Let's hope the Phantoms veering off is a good thing, and not an omen of more bad things to come."

\* \* \*

><p>The battle for Qamar continued to rage as before, but with the Phantoms now gone, our biggest nightmare here on the ground was over. Banshees had much thinner armor and were much easier to hit - despite being fairly nimble and maneuverable in the air, they were a lot more vulnerable to ground fire than their heavy troop carrier counterparts. I felt grateful that at least one thing was going our way at the moment, and hopefully what my aide had predicted would be true as well. We had our hands beyond full dealing with all the Remnant forces that had already landed since the invasion had begun. We definitely didn't need a fresh batch dropping in after them, too.<p>

Through it all I tried my best to coordinate the various ground elements involved in the counterassault - the battalions' two attached Scorpions, the Mantis, our three remaining Warthogs, and both units of Marines. One thing I hadn't heard from in a while was the upstairs division; I had no idea what Willis's squadrons were up to at the moment, nor what their status was. I knew I needed to get an update on that soon, but since the Phantoms didn't seem to be reappearing yet, I figured things were pretty stable. I had to trust I'd be kept in the loop as far as any issues went, and focused instead on forging ahead with a new battle plan until I could get back into contact with my husband.

Since I'd already spoken with Major Harris over the COM about it, I laid out some of the details for Major Cole Warfield now, in his presence. We were able to link up after we'd both moved away from the center of the conflict so we could get to what Marines of our ranks were truly there for - strategizing. From the looks of things I disliked this part of the job every bit as much as Warfield did, but we both knew it was our duty, even more so than actively fighting on the frontlines as we preferred.

With a Marine escort surrounding us and a higher-than-usual concentration of palm trees forming a concealed canopy above, the impromptu meeting got underway.

"I've already issued new orders to Major Harris about this, Cole, but you and your Marines need to be informed as well," I said. I pulled out my datapad and let a holo-image of the island display above it. "Barring any complications - another attack from the Prometheans, for instance - I want to see our units start to form a tighter perimeter around the Storm landings. We want to keep them as far from the ruins as possible, since we know that's what they're really after - and we want to contain them so they're easier to eliminate."

In front of me, Major Warfield crossed his arms over his chest. "And how do you propose we do that, \_ma'am\_?"

I ignored his inflection on the last word and continued. "By working together, Major. I want you and Harris to do a better job of teaming up now that most of the Eighth is in the midst of the combat as well. We'll keep our heaviest armament on the fringes, forcing the Storm to stay within the perimeter we've created or end up alien paste on the ridge. From there we use the fallen debris and broken junk from the battle as cover, and continue pressing forward." Pulling off my helmet now, I held it close to my side with one hand and used the other to scratch the side of my head - something I hadn't been able to do for hours now. "Beyond that, we keep doing what we're doing - hitting 'em hard with all we have."

"And the Banshees, ma'am? The Phantoms may have taken an extended leave of absence, but you can bet those screaming purple things are going to bring any plan of consolidating our forces to a screeching halt."

"Fair enough, Warfield. But I've got faith that our squadrons in the air will take care of it."

The major openly scoffed this time. "Like they have been, you mean?"

That did it. Insulting me was one thing; insulting Willis and his pilots was quite another. "Are you implying that our Marines in the air aren't doing their jobs, Major?"

"I'm not implying anything, Colonel. Just stating fact. We've had all kinds of shit being thrown at us down here from the start. A better air support unit - "

"A better air support unit doesn't \_exist\_. I should know. They're the ones that saved my damn company when we were about to become Flood food in fucking Voi five years ago."

Warfield chuckled humorlessly. "I can think of a few reasons why they had a vested interest in your safety, ma'am."

"My husband had little to do with it, actually. His squadron came in at the tail end to pick us up, but we were rescued by the group that flew in ahead of his. Others from his unit."

"Whatever. I'm - "

Suddenly, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter came bursting into the inner circle we'd formed, trying to deal with our plans privately while still being protected by the Marines surrounding us. For a moment he just stood there giving me a dull look, like he didn't know what to say.

"Staff Sergeant? What's going on? Spit it out," Major Warfield prompted.

"Yes, sir."

I watched as Porter swallowed...then returned his focus on me.

"Ma'am, I thought you should be informed. One of the Pelicans that just went down was Major Hawk's."

## 21. Chapter 20: Facing Reality

### \*\*Chapter Twenty: Facing Reality\*\*

I shoved on my helmet and started sprinting as soon as the words were out of Staff Sergeant Porter's mouth. In the moment I didn't think of anything else except that I needed to get to Willis, make sure he was okay. He had to be okay.

It was several seconds later that reality finally hit and I realized I had no idea where I was going. I was running around like a chicken with my head cut off in the middle of a war zone, not knowing what to say or do. I was setting a bad example and I knew it, but right now I just didn't care about anything else. I had to find my husband.

"Colonel, wait!"

I stopped dead in my tracks and paused, standing there with a panic-struck look on my face as I waited for my aide to catch up. Major Warfield was close behind, along with the rest of Porter's squad - our security.

"Ma'am, all due respect, but you know it's not - "

"Where is he, Josh?" I demanded, cutting him off. "Where did his Pelican land?"

"We don't know yet, ma'am. I'm still trying to get the information out of the squad that saw him go down."

"Jesus." I put a hand to my temple out of reflex, almost surprised when all I felt was the hard outer shell of my helmet beneath my hand. I knew I wasn't in the right frame of mind at the moment, and there was only one thing that would change that. Finding Willis. "Well, get his location from them, Staff. \_Now.\_"

"Yes, ma'am."

Beside him, Warfield cleared his throat. "Anything I can do to help, Colonel?"

I whipped around to face him and glared. "No. You've done enough, Major. You have your orders. Get back to your battalion."

Even the major seemed hesitant to challenge me at a time like this. "Will do."

Finally I released a sigh as Warfield turned to leave. I needed to get back in control, or I wasn't going to be much help getting aid to my husband. If he was alive. \_He has to be, \_I thought. \_Please, Will. Hang in there.\_

"Ma'am?" It was Porter again. "Just spoke to the squad that witnessed the crash. Looks like Major Hawk's bird landed closer to the Eighth's

lines than we thought, near the ruins."

"Let's move out then, Staff. I'm taking your squad and a medic, and we're going. Lead the way."

"Got it, Colonel."

Through the trip it was hard not to think back to the last time this had happened - almost six years ago when the Covenant had first found and attacked Earth. At the time I'd just arrived to the human homeworld myself from Sigma Octanus IV, tasked right away with finding two missing pilots in the surrounding area in Austria. I didn't discover until later that one of them - the only survivor of that crash - had been Willis.

Needless to say, I'd been more than a little peeved at my CO once we'd returned to base. But mostly I'd just been glad that my husband was fine. Injured and a little bloody, but alive.

I hoped we'd get lucky again and find the same here.

"Ma'am, with the assault going on it might take us a while to get there on foot. And it'd be very risky," my aide said to me then. "I'd suggest commandeering one of the 904th's Warthogs before we go further."

I nodded, barely able to keep any thoughts that weren't about Willis straight. "Agreed, Josh. We'll take the Troop 'Hog. I'll order the Marines on it to do some straight-up ground fighting till we get back."

Besides having the space we needed, the troop carrier 'Hog also wouldn't impede the progress of the battle too much since it didn't have a mounted gun like the others. It simply meant that the Marines on it were going to have to stay put for a while.

"Marines, off the 'Hog, now!" I shouted as we approached the vehicle, weapon in hand with the barrel pointed low. "You'll get it back later, but right now, we've got a downed pilot to rescue." \_And if we don't get to him soon, it might be too late\_.

"Yes, ma'am," the leader of the group, a gunnery sergeant, replied. "Boys and girls, you heard the lady! Everyone up! On your feet!"

As the Marines cleared the 'Hog, one of them stopped as he exited and looked over at me. It took me just a split-second to recognize who he was by the strands of light brown hair sticking out from under his helmet. The same color as my oldest son and his father.

"Matthew," I said, a little surprised.

"Nat? What's going on? What do you need the 'Hog for?" The younger Hawk seemed puzzled for a moment, then quickly put two and two together. "Oh, \_shit\_. It's my brother, isn't it?"

Not wanting to waste more time, I quickly nodded. "I'm sorry to say this, but yeah. Go ahead and jump back in. You're coming with us, kiddo."

"But...what the hell happened?"

"We don't know yet, Matt, other than his Pelican was shot down." I swallowed hard on the sudden lump in my throat. "Now come on. We need to hurry."

\* \* \*

><p>Getting to the crash site proved problematic thanks to everything going on around us - our driver was having to constantly dodge incoming fire from Banshees and pockets of alien ground troops, and even had to swerve out of the way of exploding plasma grenades a couple times. By the time the smoking UNSC craft came into view, all of us in the back had burned through most of the clip in our guns trying to keep the 'Hog - and its occupants - out of harm's way.<p>

And in the meantime, I tried my best not to let my fear for Willis take over.

The driver came to a skidding halt once we were a few meters away and I instantly jumped out the back, Matthew, Porter, and Doc Reynolds - whom we'd also picked up along the way - hot on my heels. I could hear my brother-in-law yelling something at me from behind, but for some reason I couldn't make out the words while I ran up to my husband's bird. The only thing in the world that mattered to me right now was finding out if he was safe.

Things didn't look so good on the outside, though. The hull was scratched and scored, especially in the rear and the sides. Up front, the cockpit windows had held but were full of spiderweb cracks along the center. If Willis had survived, he'd be damn lucky. \_He did. I know he did,\_ I thought. \_Don't doubt that, Cooper.\_

Still, I steeled myself and took a deep breath before entering through the back.

"Willis!" I called out as I crawled through the awkward angle of the troop bay, tilted from the bad landing. "Willis, can you hear me? Are you okay?"

No response. My pulse beat faster in my ears and I hurried toward the door to the cockpit. I slung my DMR behind my back and pushed at it with everything I had. But much to my great frustration, it still didn't budge.

"Oh, come on, you stupid piece of shit," I muttered under my breath. "Open up!"

"Colonel, let me help."

I turned around to find the staff sergeant just behind me now. He placed his SAW on one of the bucket seats inside the troop bay, then came over to the door to help me push. With some effort, we finally got it open and peeked into the cockpit. I inhaled sharply at what we saw.

Willis was still strapped to his seat, but his body was limp and unmoving, obviously held in place only because of his harness. There was blood all over the console, down his flight suit, and on his face. I glanced over to the side then and saw that his helmet had

broken off in the crash, too. It lay in three distinct pieces on the floor.

Most frightening, however, was the fact that it didn't look like his chest was going up and down as it should be.

"No," I whimpered, completely out of reflex. "No, honey, no."

Tears clouded my vision as I moved up and placed two shaky fingers to his neck. I felt for a pulse for what seemed like ages, but I couldn't sense a thing. This time I let out an agonized moan and took my husband's bloodied face in my hands.

"Willis, no. Come back to me, baby. Come back. Wake \_up\_."

Behind me, Porter had backed off and Matthew momentarily took his place.

"Natalie? Oh, Christ. Holy...Is he - ?"

"All right, everybody move!" Doc Reynolds barked then. "Out, now! He's \_my\_ patient, and if you want him out of here alive, you all need to vacate the Pelican. Right \_now!\_"

"Doc," I said, voice strangled, "Doc, he's not - "

"Now, Colonel! Even you." His tone was firm, but his blue eyes were sympathetic when his gaze met mine. "I'll do everything I can for him. I promise. But I need you to step out while I assess the major, ma'am. Please."

Gathering up what little strength I had left, I slowly nodded. I took hold of Willis's limp hand and squeezed, then stepped back into the troop bay before leaving the craft.

Outside, I started shaking.

"Nat? Nat? \_Natalie.\_"

I finally looked over at Matthew, mildly annoyed with his insistence. "What?"

He swallowed. "Do you think he'll be okay?"

I shook my head, barely able to hold back the tears now. I wasn't prepared to go full waterworks in front of my Marines, but I couldn't help how I felt. "I, uh...I don't know, kiddo. I...couldn't feel a pulse when I tried for one. Nothing."

Willis's little brother went even paler than before. "Oh, God. No."

I finally lost it and dropped down hard onto the sandy dirt against the Pelican, sitting with my knees up and my face in my lap as a harsh sob threatened to rip through me. I hadn't felt a thing when I'd touched his neck for a heartbeat. Not one damn thing. Willis was -

"Ma'am, I've got a pulse," Reynolds announced then, breaking into my morbid thoughts as he finally emerged from the back of the bird.



"It's faint, but it's still there. We're going to have to hurry out of here if we want him to make it, though."

\* \* \*

><p>Even with the medic's words, I'd gradually calmed down a bit but couldn't feel relieved yet until Willis woke up, whenever that might be. Reynolds had managed to extract him from the Pelican pretty fast, bringing him back closer to the ruins in the Troop 'Hog, where a makeshift medical tent had been set up. Per his instructions, though, I had to wait outside for a while until Doc came to get me.<p>

Matthew stood beside me as well, eager for news on his brother. The medic shook his head at him as soon as he walked out, however.

"Sit tight, kid. Major Hawk's not out of the woods yet. Far from it. Only the lieutenant colonel can go in to see him for now."

"But - "

"Sorry. Spouse only until he's stabilized. It's the regs."

Matthew's expression hardened. "That's not fair! He's my big brother!"

I let out a weary sigh, already feeling emotionally exhausted...and knowing I was still in for a lot more. "Listen to what Doc says, Matt. It's probably for the best. I'll be back out in a bit and let you know."

My brother-in-law looked beyond pissed for a second, brown eyes blazing, yet did as he was told and stayed put. In the meantime, I headed into the tent with Corpsman Reynolds.

"Don't sugarcoat it, Michael," I said to him. "How's my husband doing?"

He ran a hand through his thick crop of black hair before answering. "He's hanging on, ma'am. But barely. That crash was pretty bad."

I swallowed for what felt like the millionth time today. "What's wrong with him?"

"Well, the impact was fairly traumatic, as you could probably tell from the state of the cockpit. His helmet was broken in the hit, so he's got a pretty severe concussion from that. If he wakes up, he'll have plenty of dizziness, nausea, headaches, vomiting, the works to deal with for a couple of weeks. That means no flying for a long while. The good news, though, is that the bone remained intact. There's no sign of a skull fracture or any leaking brain fluid, so the helmet did help.

"Beyond that, he's got superficial bruising across his sternum from where the strap was holding him in place, which may have also caused some internal injuries when his bird hit the ground. I can't scan for that here since all the equipment for that kind of thing is at the field hospital on the mainland. He's got a few broken ribs that I do know of - one on his right side, two on his left - and a couple of broken fingers in his right hand, along with some other minor scrapes

and cuts." The medic sighed. "It's really the force of the impact that'll determine how bad things get from here on out."

My head swam for a moment from all the implications. Eventually, I settled on the most important one. "But is he...is he going to make it?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't say that for sure right now, Colonel. He's still critical, and we can't get him to the field hospital for better treatment until the fighting dies down." Reynolds stopped then and looked down at his boots. "I won't lie to you, though, ma'am. If he makes it till then, he'll be lucky."

The corpsman said that last part as gently as he could, but it was still hard to take in. I could feel the tears forming just beneath the surface again, but I held onto my tight control simply by reminding myself that whatever the prognosis, at least Willis was still alive. He had a shot, and that was a lot more than I'd expected when I'd first found his wrecked body inside the Pelican.

"All right," I replied softly. "I guess I'll take that."

Reynolds nodded. "He's just ahead of you, ma'am. Sixth cot on the left."

"Thanks."

As I stepped up to my husband's bed and saw him lying there, broken and unconscious, a million thoughts went through my mind. \_How could I have prevented this? What if he doesn't make it? How can I go back home when this is over and tell our kids?\_

I thought of Lieutenant Commander Courtney Hayden, too, my best friend's widow, who'd just had to go through the same thing herself. For real. These weren't just panicked contemplations to her, but hard realities she now had to face and live with daily. And yet she'd chosen to continue anyway, to keep doing her duty even in the face of immense heartache. I respected that, and while I'd been able to more or less do the same when I'd lost my baby a few years back, I wasn't sure I could do that if I lost Willis.

He'd been with me from the very beginning, since we were nothing but a couple of young teenagers in love. He'd saved me back then from an abuser who'd beaten me so badly he'd landed me in the hospital one day, and Willis had been there to help me recover - both physically and mentally - every step of the way. It was his strength and support that had pulled me out of my shell, had made me grow up and learn not to take any shit like that again from anyone. A lot of who I was today was because of the values instilled in me by the Corps, but also because of him. Willis was everything to me, had given me our kids and with them, had made the War truly worth fighting for. Without him, I just wouldn't know what to do.

I pulled my helmet off then as I crouched down beside his head, one knee in the dirt. I reached out with a hand and pressed it gently to his forehead, feeling his hair beneath my fingers before placing them on his smooth skin. And then, with an unsteady voice, I spoke.

"Hi, honey. It's me." My throat closed up for a moment and I had to wait for the deep hurt to subside before I could start again.

"Christ, Will. I really wish...I really wish you hadn't gotten into this mess. I should have checked on you sooner. I'm sorry."

I swallowed, knowing somewhere in the back of my mind that even that wouldn't have changed anything. I could've said a few last words to him about the mission, but I wouldn't have known to say something of real import. Like -

"I love you, Willis. So much," I said aloud, choking back a sob. "Always have, always will. Get better soon, honey. I'll be here when you wake up."

I carefully leaned down to kiss his hair then since the respirator he had on kept me from kissing him on the lips. After that I crouched there a minute longer, knowing I should go; I still had two battalions of Marines to lead in the fight. But just as I started to get up, a new figure approached. Thinking it was Reynolds at first, I turned around and immediately gave the man a questioning look.

"Brandon? What are you doing here?"

Captain Brandon Heat licked his lips. "I uh, I came to see how he was doing, ma'am. I watched him go down. Heard it, too."

"He's not good, Heat. But wait. How did you even get in here?"

"That's...not important." My husband's best friend and wingmate took in a deep breath. "Cooper, there's something I need to tell you about the crash."

## 22. Chapter 21: No Holds Barred

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-One: No Holds Barred\*\*

I stood there and blinked back at Heat for a second, curious as to what he meant by his words. My mind was still in a bit of disarray from everything that had just happened, and I couldn't think of a reason for what he was saying.

"What is it?" I asked. "I thought the Storm got him. One of the Banshees up there. Right?"

The captain swallowed. "There's that. They were gunning for us hard but that's not what did it. I...may have helped things along, Colonel."

"How? What do you mean? Just tell me, Brandon."

He held up his hands in surrender then. "Natalie, I want you to know that I never meant...you know Willis is my best friend. Has been for years. He's like a brother to me, and I care about both of you guys. I'd never - "

I couldn't help the undercurrent of consternation that made it into my next words as anger rippled through me. "Heat. What the hell did you do?"

My husband's wingmate licked his lips again, and this time his voice

wavered a bit. "I shot at him, Cooper. A Banshee swooped in on his six, getting ready to tag him. I had him in my sights but it ducked out of the way at the last minute, and I...I got the back of Willis's bird with my MG."

In the moment it was all I could do to digest what I'd just heard. I simply continued to stand there and listen - not because I wanted to, but because I couldn't do anything else. I didn't even move.

"It was an accident, ma'am," Captain Heat went on. "I was trying to go for the Storm bastard behind him but I missed and hit Hawk instead. Then one of the birds next to us got drilled with enemy fire and a big chunk of the hull just came flying off. Debris blew sideways and it...it struck Willis's Pelican hard, right where I'd hit. Compromised the craft. He - "

"That's enough, Captain," I said in an even tone, holding up a hand. "I heard all I need to know."

"Natalie, really, I'm - "

I turned on him then, eyes blazing. "You're what? Sorry?" I pointed a furious finger at Willis's cot, where he lay barely clinging to life. "My husband might die because of you!"

"I...I know," the pilot replied in a low voice.

"He's not stable and he's not waking up! And for that, I find out I have you to thank!"

I paused to take in a breath. My voice was cracking and I could feel the deep hurt enveloping me. When I tried to speak a second time, it was scarcely above a whisper. "I love him more than anything except for my kids. I have no fucking clue how to deal with this. And you, of all people, Brandon. You're his wingmate. His friend. You're supposed to have his back and instead he's barely alive because you shot him."

Heat didn't even attempt a response this time. He just stood there now, looking over at Willis with regret in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, and that's all well and good." Gripping my helmet tight in my hand, I purposely pushed past him as I made to leave. "But know that if he dies, I will never forgive you."

\* \* \*

><p>Once I was out of the medical tent, Matthew tried to accost me to get information on his brother's condition, but I was in no mood to deal with anyone else at the moment. I gave him a bare-bones update that likely Doc Reynolds had already given him, pushed my helmet back on, and moved ahead.<p>

Now that I knew there was nothing to be done for Willis right now except wait, the best thing I could do to help was get the battle under control so he could be flown to the mainland. I also had to check in with Major Erin Collins, my husband's CO, and make sure she was aware of the command change with her squadrons. Willis had been in charge of his own Kilo and Victor Squadrons - as well as Cobra -

when he'd been shot down. She needed to be informed so a new pilot could take his place. From what the medic had said, even if he made it through, Willis wasn't going to be back in the fight anytime soon.

Something I knew was going to be just as painful to him as his wounds whenever he woke up. \_If\_ he woke up. Flying for him came in second only to his family; he wouldn't take well to being grounded for such a long period of time, just like I hated it when I couldn't be there myself to lead my Marines because of an injury. But that was something we'd tackle later - if we got the chance. \_Please, Will, \_I thought to myself.\_ Keep fighting. You can beat this thing.\_

Presently, I stepped close to Porter's squad for security and opened up a private COM channel. "Major Collins, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper on the ground. Please respond."

It took a minute for her to answer. "This is Flight Leader, ma'am. What can I do for you?"

I swallowed. "It's Major Hawk. I'm not sure if you know about this yet, but he was just shot down. We've got him in the medtent now and he's alive and being cared for, but his prognosis is less than good. You're going to need to find someone to take over his squadrons for a while." Possibly indefinitely, but I refused to believe that. Wouldn't even let myself think it.

"I...see. I'll get that done now, Colonel. And ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry to hear about the major. I hope your husband recovers quickly."

"Me too, Collins. Thanks. I'll keep you updated on his condition if it changes. Cooper out."

With that done, I stood there a moment longer after the connection cut, trying to reel my emotions back in. If I was going to get through the rest of this fight in one piece and ensure safe passage to the field hospital for Willis, I needed to believe he'd be okay and just do my job.

"Staff Sergeant?"

My aide instantly glanced up. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Gather your squad. We're taking the 'Hog back to the 904th's lines. Let's go kick some ex-Covie ass."

Staff Sergeant Porter flashed me a faint grin, replying more enthusiastically this time. "Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \*

><p>In a way, it was nice to know the rest of the world hadn't come to a screeching halt after Willis's hard landing. When Porter, his squad, and I arrived back at the 904th Infantry Battalion's lines, the battle seemed to be continuing to rage in earnest around

us.<p>

"Colonel, it's a good thing you're back!" Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd shouted to me above the din as I jumped out of the Troop 'Hog. "I heard about what happened to Major Hawk! I'm sorry! Is he all right?"

I shook my head, gripping my rifle tight. "He's in the medtent awaiting evac to the mainland! Situation's not good, I'd rather not talk about it!"

"Right!"

"What's been going on here?"

"We've been trying to hold our own per your orders, ma'am! Things've gotten better since the Phantoms took off, but unfortunately they left us a lot to play with! The Storm are everywhere, Colonel!"

"Well, let's hop to it then, Cal! We need to get this contained ASAP!"

"Acknowledged!"

I heard the rough grating of tires against packed sand behind us after that as the Warthog we'd just vacated set off to get closer to the forward lines. I hoped they'd make it there without incident; Porter's squad and I had had a hell of a time in the back of the unwieldy vehicle, firing off burst after burst at the Remnant troops that had harassed us along the way. What we'd faced were only pockets of enemy warriors - out here, we were facing the whole damn army.

Moving up to a hunk of debris through the incoming fire, I ducked behind it with Staff Sergeant Porter to my right, and the spook to my left. I held my DMR against my chest with the barrel straight up, back pressed against our cover, and turned to face Lloyd.

"What have you been able to gather in terms of enemy strength, Lieutenant? Do we have an estimate on how many have arrived?"

"Hard to say, Colonel! I've spent most of the time in firefights myself!"

"Give me a ballpark!"

"Yes, ma'am! I'd guess we've got about a battalion's worth of aliens with boots on the ground now after all those Phantoms unloaded their troops! Add that to the company or so they started with during our initial assault on Qamar, and we're looking at a lot of ex-Covies!"

"Dammit," I muttered. "And we have no way of knowing if they've got anymore hiding inside that ship in orbit! There's still a chance those Phantoms that took off might come back with more!"

"Negative, Colonel! That class of enemy ship can't hold more than they've already brought dirtside. That's some good news for us, at least!"

I snorted. "About time!"

"Roger that!"

It became clear to me now more than ever that we desperately needed to get our reserve battalion in the fight. So long as all of our air support was locked in atmosphere and space combat, however, that was something we just couldn't do.

But we had one advantage over the Storm that they didn't - heavy groundside support for our pilots in the skies. Not only did we have more armor and vehicles currently involved in the battle, but we also had our heavy weapons Marines and a Mantis wreaking havoc wherever it went. I figured that had to count for something, even if our pilots were technically still outmatched by the all Banshees flying around.

"Ma'am? Do you have a plan?"

Under the circumstances I couldn't quite grin, but for some reason I felt a little more hopeful than I had before. "Always, Lloyd! Wait one!"

Getting tired of having our cover viciously assaulted, I tapped my aide's shoulder and had him quickly switch places with me so I could see what we were up against on the other side. What I found when I peeked around the debris were two Jackals and four Grunts running up to our position, weapons hot.

"Porter! Get on the other side and give us some suppressive fire!" I yelled at him. "Cal!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You're going to nail the Jackal on the left while I take the one on the right! Josh'll handle the Grunts! Let's move!"

"On it!"

Once in position, Staff Sergeant Porter opened up first, returning a long burst of gunfire at the oncoming Storm group. Two Grunts were already lying in a pool of light blue blood on the dirty sand when the ONI operative and I joined the fray, firing several tight bursts at the two Jackals in rapid succession. The whole skirmish took less than a minute, ending with six more aliens down.

"Nice work!" I exclaimed. "Now let's - "

"Flight Leader to Ground Actual, please respond."

I paused and pulled back behind our cover, motioning for Porter and Lloyd to momentarily do the same. "This is Ground Actual. Go ahead, Collins."

"We've had a development, ma'am. Looks like even more of the Storm are bugging out."

I frowned. "What? Why?"

"Because we got 'em, Colonel," Willis's CO said smugly over the COM. "Against all odds, we've defeated the Seraphs in orbit. They've only got about half a squadron left and they all just retreated back to the barn. That makes our Broadwords free to engage in atmosphere now, ma'am."

I could hardly believe the good news. The Phantoms taking off had been one thing, but this was a real game-changer. With the Broadwords freed up to help us on the ground now, they could do a lot of damage to the number of Storm troops we were facing with their bombing runs. It also meant I could divert one of Willis's squadrons to go pick up Major Brewer's battalion on the mainland, giving us some much-needed reinforcement.

And most importantly, they could bring Willis there for treatment.

"That's fantastic, Major," I replied over the open channel. "Come on down. Let me know when your squadrons are inbound, and then make sure Kilo and Victor's acting commander have them veer off for the coast. I'm going to send them across the water to go get the 213th Infantry now that we've finally got an opening."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get it done. You'll be hearing from me soon."

"Excellent. Cooper out."

As soon as the connection cut, Lieutenant Lloyd gave me an inquisitive look beside me. "Ma'am? What was that about?"

"That was our air wing commander," I answered. "We've now got superiority in the skies."

\* \* \*

><p>More than anything I wished Willis had been here to see this, but I could feel at least a little better knowing that now, he'd get the proper treatment he needed from the field hospital. The Pelican carrying him and a handful of other critically wounded Marines had just lifted off, headed for our staging area on the mainland. I'd go there myself to visit him and take care of a few other things later. At the moment, there was still plenty of mop-up to do on the island.<p>

"Colonel, this is Major Warfield," I heard over the COM then. "I'd like a word."

My reply was curt this time, as his had always been in the past. "About what, Major? We're in the middle of something."

"I understand, but it's important."

"Fine. Meet me at these coordinates in five. I'll be here."

I wondered what the major possibly had up his sleeve now. Things were no longer dire but we still had a good deal of work to do; most especially if the Storm received reinforcement themselves from the ruins anytime soon, or if the Prometheans showed up. But in the end, I figured this was as much of a lull as we were going to get. If



Warfield had something to say, now would be the time.

The perpetually disgruntled battalion commander jogged up to me a few minutes later, just under the five-minute mark I'd set. Surrounded by Porter's squad for protection, as always, I folded my arms across my chest with my DMR on one shoulder and looked at him.

"Well?"

"I wanted to apologize for earlier, ma'am. Is your husband okay?"

I released a sigh, the incessant worry over Willis's condition never far from my thoughts. "I don't know yet. He's aboard one of the Pelicans Major Collins just sent to the mainland. Doc said he'll get the care he really needs there. It's still a big toss-up for now."

He shifted his stance uncomfortably. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. I've been hearing that a lot today." I glanced down at my boots, covered in dirt and sand. "Doesn't change the facts."

"No, ma'am. But for what it's worth, I wish Hawk a speedy recovery."

"Thanks. Is that all?"

"No, ma'am. I also came to say that...you might've been right about our air support. They've done a damn good job. More than I gave them credit for at the start."

I snorted. "Now that they've single-handedly changed the tide of the battle, you mean?"

"Yes. And there's...more. That I wanted to say, Colonel."

"Let's have it, then, Major. Speak freely."

He too crossed his arms over his chest. "You asked me before if we had a problem. Now seems like a good time to tell you. It has nothing to do with the obvious you might be thinking; I have no issues with female commanders in general. I've fought with many who were worthy of their rank and that I'd gladly follow anywhere, without question."

"I'm just not one of them, huh?"

Warfield shrugged. "Like I said, I have my reasons."

"And they are?"

"Firstly, that no matter how you like to slice it, you play favorites. Most of my Marines saw it as a snub when our battalion got relegated to backup when we first landed on Qamar, and you sent in your former battalion, the Eighth Engineers, in to do the heavy lifting instead. We're an infantry batt, ma'am. That should've been our job to do."

I frowned. "The fact that those titles aren't supposed to mean much in the Corps notwithstanding. We're all Marines here, Cole. We're all

trained to fight."

"I don't contest that, Colonel. But I can say none of us in the 904th liked that move."

"Okay. And besides?"

He blew out a breath. "Laraza. And your treatment of him. All due respect, but he's a fucking reb, ma'am. He's the enemy, just as much as the Storm and the Prometheans are. That prick's shown his disloyalty to you and to the UNSC time and time again. Even to the point of nearly killing you a short while ago. And yet you always give him the benefit of the doubt, and don't attack his forces. Instead, you try to rally them behind us. That I just...don't understand. At all."

"Well, I guess that's what makes me the LTC and not you, Cole." I sighed a second time. "Look. Like you, I have my reasons for what I do. Some of it has to do with what I believe, and some of it has to do with what I know is best for my men - whether they like it or not, whether they agree with my actions or not, even whether I like it or not. I'm not here to win a popularity contest. I'm here to get all of you home safe in the midst of what's become an unholy clusterfuck. To do that, I always have to look at the bigger picture when I make my decisions. Not what's going to sound good to everyone at the moment. Are we clear?"

The major stood silently for a minute, seeming to soak in my words. When he'd finished absorbing them, I couldn't tell whether he'd changed his mind about me or not. His body language gave nothing away.

Eventually, though, he met my gaze. "Clear, ma'am."

## 23. Chapter 22: From Bad to Worse

**\*\*Chapter Twenty-Two: From Bad to Worse\*\***

\*\*\*\*\*1956\*\* Hours, February 23, 2558. \*\*\*\*\*Qamar Island Ruins,\*\*\*\* Planet Khan\*\*\*\*. "The War Inside," Outer Colonies.\*\*\*\*\* Day Five of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*

Four days later the fighting wasn't so much a constant tooth-and-nails battle as it had been at the start, but rather a background nuisance that could still potentially give us plenty of trouble while our scientists studied the ruins.

With the arrival of half of Major Dani Brewer's battalion to the island in previous days, things had gone considerably well for our side, with the Storm having no recourse but to fight it out on the ground now that most of their air support was either stowed in their ship or obliterated. There was still the technical possibility that the Remnant might try to win by bombarding the planet from orbit, yet that would put their holy site in jeopardy, historically not something they were all that keen to do. I sincerely hoped they continued to see it that way. So long as they did, we had a firm defense in place - and now, our biggest worry was not simply surviving, but ensuring that no aliens got through to the underground

chamber that housed the portals.

That was still the overarching concern in all this. At the moment, however, I had a few other items to take care of now that all three of my battalions were already engaged in their combat duties. The first was meeting with Major Erin Collins for an update on our own pilots' situation.

Standing inside our newly set-up command tent by the ruins, I sipped at a cup of coffee while I watched various figures scroll across the holo-table in front of me. I'd been up for over twenty-four hours since the last time I'd been able to catch a few zees in here; now it was only the caffeine keeping me on my feet.

Major Shawn Harris grinned at me from the other side of the table. "Long days, eh, Colonel?"

I glanced up and snorted at him. "Does it show that much?"

"Oh, I'm not going there, ma'am."

I chuckled. "I suppose that's fair." I rubbed at my temple with one hand while still holding onto my coffee with the other. My weapon and helmet were lying on the small cot behind me, where I'd slept for all of three hours over a day ago. "Truth is, I've had it a lot worse in the past. Hell, we all had it worse when we got rid of the Storm presence back on the mainland. This has turned into a field exercise in comparison."

"And yet it's taken a toll," he said quietly. "You're worried about Major Hawk. It shows."

"It's...not something I can help. He's still not awake yet, Shawn. And I miss him."

"I know. I don't blame you, Colonel. If you ask me, you've been doing a great job of keeping everything together after what happened."

"Thanks." I sighed. "I'm heading out to see him again in a couple of hours. There's some things I need to get in order out on the mainland before I can keep going at it on this end."

"Well, just remember to take a break sometime, ma'am," my former XO advised me. "We need you sharp on this."

"Don't I know it. Even with the Storm more or less contained for now, they're not letting up on harassing the lines and they're keeping us busy. And there's been no sign of the Prometheans for a while now." I took another long drink of my coffee. "To be honest, it's making me nervous."

"Roger that, ma'am. We'll keep things under control here while you're gone though, Colonel." Harris offered me a small grin. "I promise we won't start any big parties without you."

I smiled back weakly. "Aren't I lucky."

"Ma'am," Staff Sergeant Porter said to me then, poking his head inside the tent. "Major Collins is here to see you."

"Thanks, Josh. Send her in."

"Right away, Colonel."

"I guess that's my cue," the other major said. He picked up his helmet from a second, smaller table off to the side, then gestured at me with it. "Good luck, ma'am. I hope that pilot of yours is doing better today. I'll see you when you get back."

I nodded. "You, too, Harris. Stay safe out there."

When our air wing commander walked inside to take his place, she looked just as exhausted as I felt. Collins had just pulled her helmet off her head and it showed, her hair done up in messy bun underneath it with several strands sticking out. Technically it was against regs in garrison, but I let it go, though. It was something that tended to come last in your mind when you were out in the field fighting, and I probably looked little better myself at the moment. I held out my hand to her and we shook.

"Major Collins."

"Colonel."

"Welcome to groundside operations," I said as I stepped back, making a sweeping gesture at the tent. "It's not much, but considerably better than the nothing we had before."

"I can see that. Thank you, ma'am."

Growing tired of watching the continuous flow of data scroll across the holo-table, I finally shut it off and leaned back against it, folding my arms over my chest. "I'm a bit pressed for time so I'm going to get right to the point. I'd like a report on how our air support is holding up. I realize the Excalibur has been gone for a few days now, so I want to know how much longer you guys can sustain what you're doing up there without resupply."

Collins shifted her stance, gripping her helmet in one hand. "Well, truth is we're running on reserves right now, Colonel. Fuel and ordnance are getting very low across the board. We've picked up what we could from the staging area on the mainland; we had some canisters placed there as backup for the squadron that was shuttling supplies down from the Ex before all this began. But even that's drying up now. If the Ex doesn't come back soon..."

"Then we'll be in trouble," I finished. Our air support was the whole reason things were going as well as they were since the invasion started. Without that considerable aid for the Marines on the ground, it was very possible the Remnant would gain the upper hand again - regardless of whether or not they decided to deploy their remaining fighters once more. If that happened, shit would really hit the fan without aircraft of our own to stall them. "Okay. So what we really need is to bring in the rest of the 213th to the island tonight."

"If possible, yes, ma'am. You're going to want as many boots on the ground as you can if our birds get grounded."

"Right. I'm still going to leave a company of Marines there to maintain our presence, but everyone else needs to get here to Qamar ASAP. Get it done, Major."

"I will, ma'am."

"Good. Anything else?"

Surprising me, Collins's expression brightened suddenly. "There is one piece of good news I thought you should know. Captain Daniel Rhodes, CO of the Suave Affair, is still alive. I just got confirmation from one of my pilots."

My eyes widened in an instant. "How's that possible? I thought he went down with his ship."

"No, ma'am. He should have, and would've if he'd been aboard the Affair when it was taken out. He was actually aboard the Ex at the time, though. Meeting with the senior officers on it. The pilot I spoke to had shuttled him there herself."

Relief flooded through me at the news. That meant that not only did I still have some sort of command resource at my disposal and wasn't in charge of this entire operation on my own anymore, top to bottom, but it also meant we could be expecting support from the Excalibur to jump back in soon. Rhodes was a damn good commander - he wouldn't leave us out here alone for long. I was sure he'd think of something to get us the supplies we needed, as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

"That's the best thing I've heard in days, Major. Thanks for telling me."

"Of course, ma'am. And Colonel?"

"Yes?"

She bit her lip. "I know you're going to the mainland yourself soon to see Hawk. I just wanted to say your husband is the best pilot I've ever served with, ma'am. A great talent. I hope his condition improves."

It was a subject that was still raw for me. I had to take in a breath before answering. "That means a lot, Collins. I hope he wakes up soon, too."

\* \* \*

><p>Getting to the mainland proved simple despite the fact that I worried about the amount of fuel we were using to fly there. It was something that needed to be done, but with our reserves nearly depleted and the return of the <em>Excalibur</em> uncertain, I realized this might be the last time I'd be able to do so for a while. That would make my visit to Willis all the more important.

I stepped off the Pelican and parted ways with Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd, who'd also accompanied me on the excursion for a briefing I'd have with him and Lieutenant Commander Courtney Hayden, our other spook, later. For now, I set off with Matthew in tow and my DMR slung behind my back, helmet in hand.

It'd been a few days since I'd seen my brother-in-law, so I turned to face him as we headed for the field hospital. "Hey, kid. How've you been holding up?"

"Pretty good, I guess." The young ex-rebel scratched at his chin, dotted with a few hairs of growing stubble here and there. Not enough to turn into a beard quite yet, but Matthew would be turning twenty soon - and as he so often liked to remind Willis and I, he was a man now, not a boy. "Storm've been putting up a decent fight, but those Broadwords..." A huge grin enveloped his face. "They're awesome, Nat."

"That they are." I saw him sober then, as if he felt bad that he'd had a moment where he'd allowed himself to smile while Willis was still in what had turned into a coma now. I sighed. "Ready to see your brother?"

"I...I don't know. I just...I really want him to wake up already."

"Me, too, Matt. Will you be okay if I go see him by myself first?"

"Yeah, sure."

"After that he's all yours, promise. I've got some other stuff to take care of while we're here."

Matthew nodded. "Go ahead."

I paused to give his shoulder a squeeze once we got to the hospital's entrance, then I walked inside. What with all the fighting going on across Qamar Island now, the place was full and a buzz of activity. It looked like most of the patients had been taken care of for the night, though, and so it seemed my presence was easily noted when one of the doctors came up to me.

"Colonel Cooper, ma'am. Welcome back."

"Thanks, Doctor Kiev. How's my husband doing today?"

"No change yet in terms of consciousness, I'm sorry to report. But he's stable, and his physical wounds have been showing steady improvement."

I swallowed hard. "I guess that's good. Can I see him?"

"Of course, ma'am. Over here, same bed and room number."

"Right, I'll find my way."

"I'll come by in a few minutes myself. Need to check on another patient first, if you'll excuse me."

The doctor hurried away then while I walked down the narrow hall to Willis's room. Once inside, my emotions got the better of me and my eyes clouded up. I'd had to keep up a stony-faced facade for four days now in front of my Marines as I led them through the invasion of the island. I couldn't do one more, especially when I saw him lying

there, still unconscious, and still so clearly hurt.

I sat down on the small chair beside him carefully, as if any nearby movement would jar him. Willis was off in his dream world still, but I took his hand in mine anyway and looked him over.

It was hot inside the hospital, so he had the sheets on up to his hips but was bare-chested beyond that, with several rolls of bandages wrapped around his middle to brace his broken ribs. Just above that, I could see a big purple and black bruise peeking up from his sternum, the rest of it covered by the bandages. He had an IV drip in his arm and a respirator still on his face, and a second drip that I just noticed now that was likely a painkiller for if and when he awoke. There were a few cuts and scrapes on his face and both arms, but all in all those looked mostly healed now. Currently, the biggest impediment was simply the fact that he wasn't awake yet.

I wiped at my tears with one hand while I continued holding his in the other, feeling his wedding ring beneath my fingers. It was so damn hard to see him like this - the hardest thing I'd ever done. I figured this was probably the same hell I'd put him in tens of times before when I'd gotten into rough scrapes myself in combat - most recently when I'd been sniped through the chest by one of Laraza's hired Jackals. I felt terrible that I'd ever made him feel that way...because I sure as hell was feeling it now.

"Colonel, I'm sorry to intrude."

I turned around at the voice and glanced up. Doctor Kiev had just come in.

"It's okay, Doc. What's up?"

"I wanted to let you know since we hadn't run the exams yet when you'd come in last. There's more hopeful news for the major, ma'am. We found no signs of any internal bleeding as a result of the crash. He's still got enough hurdles to overcome with the remainder of his injuries, but at least there's nothing extra going on inside his body that would make recovery slower."

"Good." I leaned over again and ran my free hand through Willis's short hair as he slept. "So why hasn't he gotten up yet?"

"To be frank, sometimes we don't really know. His body took a pretty brutal beating in that crash-landing, Colonel. He's lucky to be alive. Between that and his severe concussion it's not too strange that he hasn't woken up so far. Could be his body just needs more rest before he's ready to tackle the greater challenges that a state of full consciousness presents."

"Well...you can't give me an estimate on when that might be? When does this start to go from a bad after-effect to something more alarming?"

"We'll give it another day or so, ma'am. If he hasn't shown signs of coming back around after a whole week, we might need to take a look at altering our prognosis."

I pressed my husband's hand between both of mine now. It felt warm and comforting, at complete odds with the doctor's words. "You're

saying there's a chance he might not come back from this?"

"I'm not saying anything yet. He's young and was healthy and fit when this occurred, so that helps. We'll keep our fingers crossed."

## 24. Chapter 23: Personal Defect

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Three: Personal Defect\*\*

When I finally emerged from the field hospital, I was feeling emotionally drained. The tears were dry now but my heart still ached, and I longed to spend the rest of my time here just sitting by Willis's side until he woke up - something I knew he'd do eventually. He had to. I couldn't take any other outcome, so I focused on the one I hoped for most. The one we all hoped for: my husband making a full recovery.

"Cooper. I heard about what happened to Willis. I hope he's doing well."

I was a bit startled by the figure suddenly standing beside me, as well as her voice; I hadn't noticed her there. "Courtney. You're here early."

She smiled, but it was faint and short. "Something you learn as a spook. Show up early, make small talk, get the scoop."

"I see."

"So how's your husband? I'm probably the only one in this whole damn camp who knows how you feel right now."

"Yeah, probably." I let out a sigh. "He's stable, but no change on the coma front. He's still out cold. It's driving me crazy not knowing what might happen to him."

"Welcome to the club. Remember when Oliver was shot in the head five years ago by a Covenant sniper?"

I snorted. "Of course I do. I was with him. Covies went gunning for me next and got me in the hand. Hurt like hell."

"Well, I thought he'd never wake up, either. But he did, stubborn bastard." She glanced over at me then. "I think we have to concede that our husbands are often a lot tougher than we give them credit for."

"Maybe, but I'm not." I chuckled humorlessly. "I can't tell you how many times I've done something like this to Willis, and he more or less takes it in stride, every time. This happens to him once or twice every few years and I'm a fucking wreck."

"Sounds about right. The fear never leaves you. I thought after Oliver survived getting sniped that he could take anything." She shook her head sadly, the pain clearly still fresh in her mind. "Turns out that's a lie."

I wanted to reply but I didn't get the chance to. Lieutenant Lloyd showed up then, ready for the briefing, and I got the feeling both



Lieutenant Commander Hayden and I were more than happy to switch subjects. After the formalities were over with, I started in on what we were really here for.

"All right. I called you both here because I wanted to make sure we were all on the same page, and kept up to date on what was happening on both the island and the mainland. Hayden, why don't you give us the details on what's been going on here since we left."

To her credit, the ONI operative deftly changed gears from our earlier conversation, transitioning smoothly to cool professional. "Not much to say on that, ma'am, to be honest. I've been keeping an eye and an ear on local activities, and on Mayor Javier Laraza in particular. Besides running his club business, I found he's been respectful of the extended truce you two agreed on." She placed her hands on her hips then, one just above her sidearm, likely out of reflex. "I haven't seen any sign that he's prudent on your behalf, such as warning his...associates about not wounding the trust between our two factions, but he's not doing anything to undermine it, either."

I released a sigh. "Well, with Laraza, that's usually the best you can hope for. As long as he's not causing problems, I'm okay with him not trying to actively prevent them from happening in the first place." I looked over at the Navy lieutenant next. "Cal?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"With you, I'd like to go back to what's going on on Qamar now. How the Storm ship slipped our notice, and what your new theory might be on their portal use. Obviously it isn't as extensive as we first thought, because they still decided to come in the usual way when push came to shove." I stole a glance back at my best friend's widow. "I'm assuming you've already been communicating with the lieutenant commander about this, and that she's up to speed on our situation."

"I am, Colonel," Hayden answered.

"Good. So have at it, Lloyd. I'd like this cleared up."

"Yes, ma'am. My new theory is this: not that the Storm were using the portals to bring in a significant amount of reinforcements, as we believed to be the case in the past, but that they actually used them to push forward a scouting unit to find out what exactly was going on here on Khan." He took a breath. "After we defeated the Remnant on the mainland and then on the island, I theorize that a small group went back, to wherever the portals lead, and let their hierarchy know that their presence here was decimated. I also think they told their command that we now had control of the holy site and were looking into things in the ruins - essentially desecrating a space we all know is sacred for them."

"And coming back in through the portals didn't afford them enough room to bring in all the extra troops and supplies they needed to mount an effective counterattack," I mused. "Once they knew about the situation here on the ground, they figured the best way to take Qamar back was to come in in force, destroy our ships in orbit so we were left on our own here on the surface and then they could eliminate the rest of us easily."

A corner of Lloyd's mouth twitched. "Except they weren't counting on you to be at the helm of all this, Colonel. You made sure we were as prepared as we could be."

I managed a small grin myself. "Damn straight. If they go after my Marines and try to take this planet back, it'll be over my dead body."

Which wasn't really as defiant as it sounded, since I'd gone through plenty of times during my stay here on Khan where such a scenario had been entirely plausible. It was only thanks to Doc Reynolds that it wasn't. I folded my arms across my chest.

"What about the Prometheans, Lieutenant?" Commander Hayden asked. "What part do they have to play in all this?"

"We're still looking into it, ma'am. As I told you in my last report, we haven't heard anything from them in a while. Until they reappear again or the scientists dig something up in the ruins about them, they're still a big unknown in all this."

"Could the Remnant's big assault have anything to do with the sudden appearance of the robotic AIs?" I wondered.

Lieutenant Lloyd sighed. "Anything's possible, Colonel. I'm sure that was something the scouts reported back to their hierarchy as well. To what extent either event had something to do with the other, though, I can't say. Could be that our nosing around in the ruins was enough for a large-scale invasion like this on its own - this new sect of the ex-Covenant in particular find this sort of thing impossible to swallow. It's a matter of religious sanctity to them, and they're zealots."

"But at the same time, they're probably curious about the Promethean presence, too," I added, understanding where he was going with his line of thought. "That might also be why their numbers are so bulked up. There's uncertainty now about whether they'd be facing one enemy here on Khan or two."

Caleb nodded. "I believe that's true, ma'am. But it might be some time before the bigger picture becomes clearer to all of us."

"Roger that." I ran a quick hand over my hair and said, "Okay. At least we're starting to get somewhere. Cal, once we're back on Qamar, I want you to keep at it with nailing down motivation for the Storm and the Prometheans. I'm thinking a lot of that will depend on what we continue to uncover down in the ruins. Hayden, you stay on track with the locals and the rebs here in the mainland. Make sure they keep upholding their end of the bargain and don't get overconfident now that our forces here have diminished. I want an immediate report from both of you if anything pressing arises."

Both ONI operatives nodded. "Understood, ma'am," they replied.

"Excellent." I looked over at Lloyd then. "I'll be heading into the ruins personally soon to check on progress there once we return to the island. You're coming with me."

"Got it, Colonel."

"For now, the rest of the night's yours. You can stay in the barracks if you want to catch some sleep, or use the time to plan or eat. Up to you, but we'll leave in the morning. In the meantime, I've got an old buddy to see."

\* \* \*

><p>I wasn't dropping in on Laraza because I didn't trust Lieutenant Commander Hayden's assessment. It was really just a matter of wanting to see things for myself, and there was something else I wanted to talk to him about that I hadn't mentioned yet to either spook. As Major Warfield had imparted to me a few days before I left, the rebel leadertown mayor had proven himself very much the enemy since we'd landed on Khan a few months ago. However, he'd also proven to be a useful resource at times as well - it was only with his men's help that we'd beaten the Storm back on the mainland so that we could even consider moving on to Qamar afterward. Despite his general disposition and my personal dislike of the man, I once again found that it might be to our mutual benefit to see if we could come to an accord.

After stopping by the barracks to secure myself a room for the night - where I planned on sleeping for the first time in days - I dropped my armor, helmet, gear, and DMR next to the bunk and left. I kept my pistol on me for emergencies, since Laraza had tended to get a little homicidal from time to time - or at least, he ordered others to be so on his behalf. I also took Matthew with me again to lead me through the streets, although he too was only lightly armed.

"So, remind me again why we're doing this?" my brother-in-law asked as we walked, getting stares from everyone because of our uniforms. "You remember this guy's minion tried to pop you last time we came here, right?"

The now-healed wound on my left arm still hurt on occasion where the rebel's bullet had grazed me. I felt it now. "Yup. Remember that clear as day, Matt."

"So why - "

I finally chuckled, but it was mostly devoid of humor. "People keep asking me that. And the answer's simple, really - I think he's got something to give to our cause."

Beside me, Matthew snorted. "Like what? A new leader because he wants you dead?"

"No. Manpower and supplies. Whenever Laraza realizes his back's against the wall unless he helps us out, he's usually inclined to help."

Willis's little brother frowned. "I don't know about this, Nat. I hope you're right."

"Noted, kiddo. Now sit tight outside the club until I come out. It's nighttime so the place should be pretty crowded; you don't have to worry about getting noticed."

"Okay." Matthew still looked nervous, just like the first time we'd come here. "I'll try to keep a low profile in the meantime. Good luck."

"You too. I'll see you in a bit."

When we turned down the street onto the next block, the whole sidewalk was packed with people trying to get in. I found it funny that just on the other side of the water on Qamar, my Marines and I were busy fighting an invasion force that could easily overwhelm the planet if we weren't there to act as a strong buffer, yet here, on the mainland, the locals didn't seem to have a care in the world. I was starting to see now why Laraza had such a hard time taking my warnings seriously when this was the environment he enveloped himself in every day. None of these civilians had any clue what was just outside their doorstep.

\_And they usually never find out,\_ I thought to myself. \_That's because of us...and yet they're constantly clamoring to have the UNSC presence gone.\_

That was the paradox of the often strife-filled relationship between the UNSC and its Outer Colonies. I'd just been introduced to the politics of it a relatively short while ago, and I still didn't understand it. But I figured that was best left to the brass; I was only here to do my job.

I'd been inside the club for all of a minute before Javier Laraza's assistant, Giovanna Torri, came up to greet me.

"Colonel Cooper," she said graciously. "Mayor Laraza is waiting for you. This way, please."

I could hardly hear her over the pulsing beat of the music, and I had to sidestep a couple of drunks as we wove our way through the main floor of the nightclub. For a moment I longed to be as blissfully ignorant as they were about the danger just beyond the city, but I realized that had never been the case for me. Because of the War, I'd always been acutely aware of potential threats for years. For a long time once the great conflict had ended, I didn't want to believe - \_couldn't\_ believe - that the Covenant or the Flood weren't coming back.

In hindsight, it had been silly of me to think they were the only ones out there with a grudge.

"Right through here, ma'am," Torri said to me then, indicating a locked door to the right. "The mayor will open it for you from the inside."

I nodded. "Thanks."

For a moment I wondered at all the secrecy, but I guess I could see why the mayor wanted to keep his ties to me on the down-low. It would also help to have a quieter, private space to talk while the club was this full. I didn't have to wait long for the esteemed local politician to appear.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, please," Laraza said, gesturing grandly past the door. "Enter."

I gave him a slight nod of acknowledgment and stepped inside. Torri came in behind me. When I took a quick look around, I could see armed guards standing at either side of far end of the room - one male, one female, each gripping an old model assault rifle with the barrels pointed at the ground. Rebels.

I was instantly on edge. "What is this, Laraza? Our meeting was supposed to be me and you. No one else." I didn't mind Torri and expected her presence, but the others made me more than a little apprehensive. So did their guns.

The mayor waved a dismissive hand at me. "Not to worry, Colonel. They are here for my personal security only. This room is soundproof. Should something unexpected happen..."

"I've never gone trigger-happy on you before. In fact, it's always been the other way around," I retorted.

"Nonetheless, this is how we shall meet. Do you agree to the terms?"

I thought of Matthew standing outside the club. If I got in a real bind I knew I could count on him. And if this was the only way Laraza would agree to a meeting, I'd have to take it. "Fine."

"Wonderful. Let us have a seat. Would you like some refreshment before we start? My beverage selection has improved since the last time you were here. I'm using new merchants."

I was vaguely curious if that meant Jackal dealers; they traded more than just weapons with the rebs. But with everything that had been going on on the island lately, and Willis's revival still very much up in the air, I needed a stiff drink more than I needed to cling to ideals. "Sure. Let's see what you got."

"Do you mind if I make the decision? I have just purchased an imported brandy from Roost I think you'll admire."

"Sounds good. I'll give it a shot."

Laraza seemed pleased, and motioned to Torri to ready our glasses for us while we sat at the small round table in the center. Then he reached for a panel on the side that revealed a wooden box. "Tell me. Do you also smoke, Colonel?"

"Nope, never have. Not planning to, either. My one vice is drink and that's plenty enough for me."

The mayor chuckled. "Heh. You do not fool me, Cooper. I am sure you have more than the one. You just don't want me to know what the others are." He met my gaze then. "I'm correct in assuming you wouldn't care for a cigar, then?"

"No, thanks." I fidgeted slightly in my chair, highly aware of the armed guards nearby and how much they'd probably love to put a bullet in my head. "Mind if we speed this up? My husband's in a coma and I'd like to get back to his bedside."

Laraza's eyebrows shot up. "Your husband is injured? How?"

"The Storm. They attacked Qamar Island in force a few days ago. One of our ships in orbit was destroyed, the other left. That's why I'm here."

"You need something from us."

I snorted as our drinks finally arrived and took a generous gulp of mine, enjoying the burn. "Come on. I thought that was obvious."

"What is it you want, then?"

"A couple of things, if you'd like to keep the situation over there contained and eliminate the risk of spillover on the mainland." I raised an eyebrow at him. "I don't need to tell you how bad that would be for business, do I?"

Javier Laraza grew mildly annoyed. "No, Colonel. You do not. Name what you need."

"First off, I need some fuel for our overhead support - and ordnance, if you have any on hand. Without resupply from our ships, we're almost down to nothing now. Given the Remnant's considerable force that could put us in a bad spot when we've just gotten things stabilized."

"I will see what I might acquire for you. What else?"

"More ground troops. I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I've moved out most of my Marines now from the staging area. I can't spare anymore, though, and if those new Promethean bastards come back into the mix - which I know they will at some point - that could cause a lot of problems, too."

Mayor Laraza scoffed. "No. With that you are on your own."

"That's not what we agreed to, Mayor."

"I do not care. You will have your supplies, but you will not use my men and women again. You're the Marines, you figure it out."

I leaned back casually in my chair. "All right. You know, if you think you've got your bases all covered, we don't need to be here at all anymore. I can recall our ship tomorrow and be off of Khan within the week."

This time, Laraza's eyes blazed at me. "You take me for a fool? You just told me your ships were gone - eliminated or left. You're bluffing. You couldn't leave this planet if you wanted to."

"Just because one of our ships departed doesn't mean it won't be back."

"Then why use our fuel?"

"For the interim. But if that's a risk you're willing to take, it's your call."

The rebel leader looked beyond displeased. He was quiet for a long

time, and I could almost feel him fuming. Finally, though, he said, "We will compromise on this matter."

"How?"

"I will prepare one company of my men for you. When you have need, they shall be ready to make for Qamar right away. But I will not send them unless required."

"Okay. I'll take that."

Laraza seemed surprised. "Very good. When do you return?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll need the fuel by then."

"As I said before, I will do what I can." The mayor drank more from his glass then, looking over his rim at my empty one. "Would you like another drink?"

I thought of Willis and the deep hurt engulfing my chest and nodded. "Yeah. I'll do one more."

\* \* \*

><p>I wasn't exactly sure how it happened. One minute I was sitting there in Javier Laraza's private back room sharing drinks with the rebel leader while Torri and his guards kept watch, the next I was getting up unsteadily on my feet. The room was swaying and it wasn't because he'd slipped anything into the liquor. I'd just downed way more than I'd thought.<p>

The next thing I remembered was standing outside the club with two men holding me up on either side of my shoulders. Or maybe "standing" was too strong a word when it took a couple others to keep you vertical. Either way, it took me a lot longer than it should have to start worrying about who they were.

"Matt?" I heard myself slur to the younger one.

"Yeah, Nat. I'm here."

"And who's...?"

"It's me, Natalie. Travis."

"Travis?" My muddled brain couldn't make sense of how or why my kid brother was here. "How did you - ?"

"I had to call him up to help me when you came out of the club barely conscious," Matthew answered. "How much did you have to drink in there?"

"More than I...should have. That brandy was...damn good." I had to pause in between my words because the street tried to come up to swallow me at one point. And then the hideous nausea kicked in.

I didn't have time to warn them. I just stumbled out of their grip, leaned over by a sewer grate in the street, and retched.

## 25. Chapter 24: Heart to Heart

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Four: Heart to Heart\*\*

When I woke up my head was pounding worse than I'd ever felt before. For a long time I just lay there in my bunk, burying my face in my pillow, willing the rest of the world to disappear. That's when I realized the pounding wasn't just inside my skull. It was at the door to my quarters, too.

"Natalie! You up yet?"

I mumbled some sort of muffled groan in reply, but I wasn't sure if Travis heard it or not.

"Well, hope you're decent, sis. I'm coming in."

Buried under a pile of covers, I knew I didn't have anything to worry about. I heard the sound of my little brother's combat boots on the floor, and then the door closing behind him. After that he walked up to my bedside and poked at my head.

"Go away, Trav," I muttered. "I mean it. And please, for the love of God, don't touch my head right now."

My brother chuckled. "So you're actually alive in there?"

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"Good." He poked at me again. "Sit up, Nat. I brought over some stuff for you that might help. And I hope this teaches you to think before you go on a bender behind enemy lines next time."

"It's not like I planned it that way."

"I know. That worries me even more."

Finally I rolled over in my bunk to face him. Or more like blink up at him through still half-closed eyes. "Travis, I'm thirty. Almost thirty-one in a few more weeks. I can take care of myself, thanks."

He snorted good-naturedly. "Yeah. Tell that to your hangover."

I pushed the heel of my hand to my throbbing forehead. "God, you sound like Mark sometimes. How do you do that?"

"Maybe I hung out with him a little too much after the War."

"Could've invited me."

"Not really. You got pregnant soon after everything was done and then you had two newborn twins and a toddler to look after."

This time, I was the one who snorted as I sat up, running a hand through the length of my hair now that it was down. "You're forgetting I was XO for my new battalion, too."

Travis grinned. "You're not happy unless you're doing twelve things



at once, are you, sis?"

"Nope. I was born to multitask. Now where's those goodies you promised me?"

My younger brother reached into his fatigue jacket pocket and produced two small pills. "Aspirin. For the headache." Then he leaned across the bed with his other hand and held up a cup of steaming coffee under my nose. "And coffee, to wake you up and...for the headache."

It was the first time this morning that the beginnings of a smile formed on my face. "Thanks, little bro. You're a lifesaver." Remembering my other meds, I gestured vaguely towards my pack and added, "Want to get me my other bottles? They're in the side pocket, on the right."

"Sure."

I waited for a moment while Travis rummaged, looking down at the T-shirt I wore underneath my battledress uniform. It didn't seem to have sustained any damage from the night before, but I couldn't say the same for the rest of my clothes. I was pretty sure I'd thrown up down the front of my jacket, from what little I remembered. Good thing I had an extra one with me.

"Here you go," my brother said, handing me the aspirin and my two pill bottles.

Grateful, I quickly knocked back the mild painkillers, then downed my other two meds in succession. When I glanced back up, Travis was staring at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Just...wondering what else it is you're taking there."

"Well, one is for none of your business," I replied bluntly. "The other's for the nightmares. I had them pretty frequently during the War, but they got really bad once I came home from Africa. So after your niece and nephew were born, I got prescribed these."

Travis frowned. "Looks like you're running pretty low. Is that bad?"

I waved a dismissive hand at him, despite the fact that it was something I grew increasingly anxious about every day. "Don't worry about it. I'll figure it out."

"Okay."

He stood there in silence next to me after that, and I got the distinct feeling he was waiting for something. I took a sip of the hot coffeee he'd given me and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Trav."

"For what?"

"That you had to see me that way last night. You're my little

brother, and I don't want - "

Travis butted in before I could finish. "Hey. First off, we're only three years apart, so I think now that we're adults that ship has sailed. We're both old enough to have seen this kind of stuff by now anyway. Second, I shouldn't be the one you're apologizing to. You're my sister so I don't mind helping you out when you're in a bind. I'd save it for your brother-in-law, who's still fairly young and sounded a smidge scared over the COM when he called me out to the club to come get you."

I tried to say something then, but he wouldn't let me speak till he was done.

"Third, it makes me feel better that I know what all this is about." His brown eyes met my green ones. "Willis is in a coma and you don't know how to deal. Am I right?"

"Yeah. You're right. But Travis, that's not an excuse."

"Like hell. You've been head over heels for the guy since high school. If you think me or Mark or Jenna or Allie or even Mom didn't notice back then, you're mistaken."

He said those last words gently, with a little amusement injected in his tone. Not to make light of the situation, but to make me feel a little less bad. As for the content, it was news to me that both of my brothers and both of my sisters knew about me and Willis from the start - and our mom, too. It made me wonder for the first time in a while how much they all knew about the circumstances of how we'd met. My personal nightmare with Ethan as a teenager was Willis's and my best kept secret...or so we'd always believed.

I didn't ask about it, though. Mostly because I didn't care now. It was something that had happened far in the past and not a sentiment I wanted to revisit again after so many years. If my family did know, or had known all along and had never said so, it didn't matter to me anymore.

"And besides, I'm sorry, too, Natalie," Travis said then, releasing a sigh of his own. "With the war and everything I haven't been around as much as I should to help you out with these things. I mean I know Mark's done what he can, being the oldest after Jenna died and everything, but I wanted to be there for you, too. I want to be a good brother to you, someone you can lean on when you need it." He went quiet for a moment, hesitated, and continued. "Like when you and Willis lost the baby. I know that was really hard on you, sis."

Though I could still feel the small tear in my heart over it - a rip that would never mend - I shrugged. "Nothing would've really mattered then. Hell, Willis barely helped me see through it, and it was his kid, too. I just...wasn't in the mood for anything for a long time after that. Nothing felt like it could overcome it. But then I got pregnant again with the twins and things seemed...easier. Like the load on me had lightened, that I had shot at being a parent again like we wanted. The pain never left completely, but it dulled. With Willis and Gabe and Liam and Olivia, my Marines, and with time." Then I met his gaze again. "And you are a good brother to me, Trav. Don't doubt that. The war keeping all of us apart wasn't your fault; it's

not any of ours. It's what we should hate the damn Covenant for."

"I like to think we do a good job of that. I know I do, at least." He ran a hand over his shaved hair, brown like mine. "I don't want any of the bullshit we've found here on Khan going anywhere near my kid. I'm going to fight hard to keep him and Kelsey safe."

A semblance of a smile returned to my face. "See? Now you know how I was thinking during the War. Anything for Willis and Gabe. And for our future together."

My brother must've seen the undercurrent of sadness in my expression, since he reached over to squeeze my shoulder then. "He's going to pull through, Nat. Whatever the doctors have been telling you, whatever the odds might be, I know Willis will be fine." He grinned again for my benefit. "If nothing else, then just because of your willpower alone."

"Heh. I wish that were true. If all my wishful thinking really did help he would've been up days ago."

"Just trust me on this one, sis. I won't disappoint."

## 26. Chapter 25: Tying Up Loose Ends

### \*\*Chapter Twenty-Five: Tying Up Loose Ends\*\*

It wasn't too long after our conversation that I made a solid attempt of getting out of bed and trying to act like a normal human being again. While Travis waited outside, I pulled on my uniform pants, socks, and boots, then grabbed a fresh battledress jacket from my pack to don over my T-shirt. After that I pulled my hair up in a tight bun and started in on the body armor. That's when I heard the damn knock again.

"Natalie!"

"Hang on," I muttered loudly. "I'm almost done."

"Setting a bad example..." I heard my brother say from the other side of the door. I snorted.

"To use your words, Trav, that ship has sailed. Gimme a minute and I'll be out."

The only thing I was missing now was my weapon holster and my rifle. I buckled my sidearm to my hip and slung my DMR diagonally behind my back before picking up my helmet off the desk. Then I walked out.

"See, all finished," I said as I stepped into the bright sunlight. Immediately I reached for my sunglasses in one of the tactical pockets on my chest and put them on against the harsh rays. The jabbing light wasn't doing any wonders for my hangover headache.

Behind his own dark glasses, Travis grinned. "Too bright for you this morning, Colonel?"

"Shut up."

He chuckled. "Yes, ma'am. So where to now? You heading back out?"

"\_We're\_ heading back out," I corrected as I took a look around at the rest of the barracks. "I'm going to need your demo team out on Qamar, Travis. In case things go sideways...even more than they already have."

My younger brother turned back at me, confused. "How do you mean?"

"I'm in charge of a lot of people - not just my Marines but the residents of this largely ungrateful planet as well. I need to know that if circumstances get bad enough, I've got a way to protect everyone from harm."

"You're planning on blowing the ruins," Travis surmised.

I nodded solemnly. "Only if we have to, of course, but it's an option we need to have ready. When I go check in on the ruins once we get back, I want your team with me to survey the underground chamber we found. Map things out, dial in all the nooks and crannies where you guys'd place charges if we needed you to." I sighed. "That way if things get hot, we could save a lot of lives with the press of a button."

"Isn't that place important to us though?"

"Only in the sense that it's important to the Storm, so it's important for us to keep it from them," I replied. \_That's also where we believe the Prometheans might be coming from. Something else we need to investigate,\_ I added to myself. But I figured lives outweighed the intel in this case.

As we walked, I kept my gaze roving across the remainder of the hasty barracks that had been set up here on the mainland and frowned. My quarters hadn't looked anything like what I was seeing for the rest of the Marines.

"They built me a command quarters," I said aloud.

"What?"

"The room I stayed in last night. I didn't just have a cot and some thin partitions like everyone else out here. It's totally private and I have a full bed, a desk, a chair and everything."

"And that's...bad?"

I chuckled lightly. "In the state I was in last night not at all, but...I hate that I've developed this distance between myself and my men now. I'm separated out."

"It's not your fault, Nat. It comes with the rank."

"I know. I just...sometimes I wish things were simple again."

Being wistful wasn't going to change anything, however, so after a

moment I mentally moved on. "Anyway. Where's Matt? I need to talk to him before we leave, and he's catching a ride back with us."

Travis pointed several meters ahead. "Kid found himself a cot in the rest of the barracks. Should be this way if I remember right."

"Where did you sleep?"

"On a cot too, near my teammates. Come on."

\* \* \*

><p>Travis left my company as soon as we saw Matthew still asleep on one of the cots; my brother said he needed to go gear up himself and get his demo team ready for the move. He'd meet me back at our Pelican later, which was fine by me. I wanted to have a quick chat with my brother-in-law, then check in on Willis this morning before we left. I prayed things had improved on the latter front.<p>

In the meantime, I found the younger Hawk snoring away lightly without a care in the world. In a way I was glad he'd gotten some restful sleep after helping me out the night before, but right now it was time for all of us to get back into the swing of things. There was a lot I needed to get done before we left the mainland, and we all needed to be back on Qamar as soon as we could.

Balancing on a foot with my arms crossed over my chest, I nudged at Willis's baby brother with my right boot. "Hey, kiddo. Time to get up. We're going to be leaving in less than an hour, and I'm sure you want to come with me to go check in on your brother before we take off. If you want in, now's the time."

He groaned irritably in much the same way I had at having been woken up, then rolled over in his cot to face me. "How are you...even standing yet?"

"I can thank my own brother for that," I replied. "Travis knocked on my door with some hangover-cure essentials and got me mobile. If I can do it with a monster of a headache, so can you."

Matthew groaned again and muttered something unintelligible. A few seconds later though he was sitting up, legs over the side of the cot in a shirt and shorts, rubbing at his eyes. Then he ran a hand through his light brown hair to wake himself up. I smiled a little, but it was sad.

"Gabriel looks just like you and Will, you know."

"Huh?"

I pointed to his head. "The hair. Your oldest nephew has the same golden brown going on. He's got my eyes though."

Willis's little brother swallowed. "Sounds nice. Can't wait to meet him."

"Soon. Hopefully. He'll be turning eight this year, not such a little guy anymore." Finally I released a sigh, trying to keep my emotions under wraps. I missed Gabe and his siblings a lot. "But we've got a

lot of work ahead of us before then."

"Yep. I know."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I guess I'll leave you to it. But just so you know, Matt, I'm sorry for yesterday. I know you were there to have my six, but I'm sure you weren't expecting it to be under those circumstances. It was wrong of me to put you in that position. I should have known better."

He waved a dismissive hand, still a little sleepy. "It's okay, Nat. You're part of the family as much as Will, so of course I'll have your back." Then Matthew looked up at me, once again seeming older than his nineteen years. "And I did it because my big brother really loves you. He'd be devastated if something happened to you, just like you've been since his crash. So I'll keep an eye out for you while he's out of commission."

The smile returned, but faintly. "Thanks, kiddo." I wanted to repeat that I could take care of myself, but suddenly stopped short and snorted. "Given the situation last night, I can't really argue that. Guess I was in dire need of a babysitter for once. I appreciate you handling it discreetly by the way, and calling Travis to help rather than someone else. I feel better knowing that this has a small chance of getting out."

"Yeah, no problem."

I nodded to him then as I turned to go. "All right. Now get a move on, kid. Let's go see how your brother's doing this morning and then we'll catch our flight."

\* \* \*

><p>Checking in on Willis didn't take too long, and it left me feeling empty and hurt again, much like I had the night before - prior to my excessive intake of booze. When I spoke to Doctor Kiev, it sounded like things hadn't changed a bit from the previous day.<p>

The rational part of me had expected that based on the odds, but the hopeful part had been sure he'd awaken just as I left for the mainland, to give me a boost in mood before I returned to battle, and give me something to look forward to on my next trip out. Sadly, I was unlucky on both counts; Matthew and I said our goodbyes to my unresponsive husband, and then we walked out, feeling a lot more dejected than we had earlier.

Next on the list was meeting with one of Laraza's men to complete the load-up on fuel and ordnance for our birds over Qamar. Thankfully that didn't take long, either, and shortly thereafter, with Matthew, Lieutenant Lloyd, myself, and Travis and his team on board, we departed.

The trip was quiet and solitary despite the full troop bay, and although I knew I'd done a good thing for my Marines on the island by securing us the supplies we needed, at least for the interim, I still couldn't help but feel like I'd failed. Willis continued to lie in a coma in the field hospital, I'd made a fool of myself at the nightclub in grief, and now I had a raging headache only barely

dulled by the aspirin because of it.

Did I mention I also had three battalions of Marines and an air wing to command?

I was mentally rebuking myself to stop with the negative - and ultimately unhelpful - thoughts when the spook, sitting beside me, gave me a small nudge with his boot.

"Excuse me, ma'am. No disrespect, but...are you okay?"

A little startled, I glanced over at him sharply. "What?"

The Navy lieutenant pointed down to my hands, where I held one of my two pictures between them. "You've been staring at that same photo for twenty minutes now, Colonel. Just doesn't really seem like you to be so distracted."

I looked down and focused on it this time: it was a picture of Willis, our three kids, and myself, taken just before my husband and I had left for Mars to drop the kids off for our mission here. Suddenly feeling weary, I let out a heavy sigh.

"You ever feel like your world's been turned upside down, Cal?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah," he answered without hesitation. "I've felt that way a couple times, actually. First was when I found out what had happened to my mom, when I was old enough to know. How she died. Second was reading through my parents' declassified files once I was a spook and finding out what had happened to my \_dad \_as a POW. The Innies and the Covies did a number on everyone but my sister back in the day."

I snorted lightly. "I suppose you're the last person I should be complaining to, huh?"

"No, ma'am. We've both been through a lot of rough shit, in different ways. And we both value family. I know this mission hasn't been a walk in the park for you from the start - and now with the invasion and your husband in a coma..." He shook his head. "I can imagine you miss your kids a lot, too."

"Every fucking minute of every day, Lieutenant." I gave him a sideways glance and a weak smile. "It's been a very long three months, Cal. And not just because my best friend died, or because I was nearly assassinated, or the outpost got overrun, or Major Hawk's coma, or even the invasion. Sometimes, I really just miss home. My sons and my daughter." I paused for a moment, then added softly, "Even more so now that their father's fate is uncertain."

"I understand, ma'am. For now, though, I feel like you've done all you can. You got us the supplies we needed, and the news that Captain Rhodes is still alive on the \_Ex\_ is promising. I hope our trip to the ruins will give us a little more to work with, too."

"Yeah. So do I."

I spent another minute staring at the picture before I flipped my helmet over and shoved it back into the padding. Dwelling on what I'd left behind on Mars wasn't going to wrap things up here on Khan any

faster, or get us home any sooner. Staying on top of what the rebels, the Storm, and the Prometheans were up to would.

\* \* \*

><p>As I stepped off the Pelican once it touched down on Qamar Island, I was about to key the COM to Major Collins with the good news on the ordnance and fuel when my aide approached fast instead, followed closely by his squad.<p>

He came to a kind of attention as I stepped out of the troop bay with Travis, giving us both a nod of acknowledgment.

"Colonel Cooper, ma'am. Captain Cooper, sir. If your team's all ready to disembark, I can escort you to the ruins."

I turned back to the ONI operative as he came out the hatch behind us. "Cal? You ready to roll?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Travis?"

"My boys and girls are ready, ma'am," my brother replied.

"All right." Glancing over at Staff Sergeant Porter then, I said, "Give me a minute to link up with Major Collins in the skies, Staff, and then we'll go."

"Of course, Colonel."

The air wing commander wasn't too hard to hail now that the fighting seemed to have died down a bit since we'd left. It wasn't something I'd been expecting, but I certainly wasn't about to question a good thing. Collins answered quickly and I got right to the point.

"Major, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," I said to her. "We've just returned from the mainland. How are things going in the air?"

"Quiet, ma'am. There's been little activity recently, although we're going to be in the same boat soon if the Ex doesn't show up shortly with those supplies."

"I can do you one better, Collins. I managed to wrangle some fuel and ordnance canisters for our aircraft while I was gone. It's not much and it won't allow your pilots to hold out for weeks, but it'll get the job done for the next several days or so while we wait for the Excalibur to come back." I glanced down at the dirt. "If nothing else, it buys us a little more time."

There was surprise in her voice when she responded. "Wow, Colonel. That's great news. How did you - ? If I may ask, ma'am."

"I leaned pretty hard on our alliance with the locals. Thankfully their esteemed leader was able to get this done for me." Not without a lot of convincing, though, I added to myself. "The supplies are waiting for you dirtside at our LZ when you're ready."



"Thank you, ma'am. I'll be sure to start rotating my pilots in for refuel and rearmament. This'll be a huge help to us."

"And in turn to us here on the ground, Major. Cooper out."

With that important order of business complete, I turned back to my aide's squad, the spook, and my brother and his demo team surrounding us.

"Okay. We're all geared up and ready to move out," I said as I pulled my DMR off my back. "Josh?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I want a sitrep on our situation here on Qamar as we go. I was gone less than twenty-four hours, but I know a lot can happen in that time." And I also wanted to find out how the 213th was integrating itself into the fight, especially now that the remainder of the infantry battalion - minus one company which remained posted at our staging area on the mainland - had been brought over to the island as well. That, however, I'd have to get from Major Brewer later.

For now, with the combat more or less stalled at the moment, our top priority was making sure all was well in the ruins.

## 27. Chapter 26: An Intro to Other Worlds

### **\*\*Chapter Twenty-Six: An Introduction to Other Worlds\*\***

While we walked and after Porter had given me the sitrep, I pulled out an energy bar from one of my cargo pockets, shifting my DMR to my right hand to handle the weight since I didn't want to further strain the newly healed left. I was aware of my aide's inquisitive glance as I did so, and knew it wasn't exactly a good time for it, but I couldn't remember when I'd eaten last. I figured if no one was actively shooting at me, then now was good enough. I'd learned long ago to take meals when I could in the field.

My husband had lain in a coma for five days now and I was hungover as all hell because of it. And we still had the whole Storm army and the ever-elusive Prometheans to deal with. I had more pressing concerns to worry about than potentially getting shot at while I ate.

Still, I finished up my impromptu meal fast and soon had my rifle back in both hands, vigilantly watching our flanks for any sign of attack - from anywhere and anyone. After several minutes, though, none came, so I keyed the COM to Major Dani Brewer to get the skinny on her battalion's status since the move.

"Brewer, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. We've just returned to the island and I'm heading to the ruins now to see if the scientists have dug up anything new yet that could help us. How's the 213th faring so far?"

The response was prompt and full of detail, both of which I'd come to expect from the newest battalion commander. "We're doing well, ma'am," she replied. "Only five casualties so far. The Storm hit us hard on our way in, but Major Collins was able to clear the skies for us pretty quick. Once we were on the ground, things seemed to die

down fast. We've been hearing the occasional sniper shot or patrol run-in, but nothing too crazy for now. Plus with the Mantis - "

"I hear you, Major. That beast has been a godsend," I responded, purposely interjecting so that she didn't continue to go on unnecessarily. "Listen, Dani, I know we haven't interacted much since you've arrived, but we will now that the 213th is on Qamar as well. Next time, it's okay to skip the filler with me. I just want the straight-up facts while we're groundside; the rest can wait for the after-action reports. Got it?"

There was a slight pause. "Yes, Colonel. Understood."

"Good. Anything else I should know?"

"No, ma'am. Although...I wanted to ask about the spooks if I could."

"Go ahead."

"I've requested that Commander Hayden send me updates about the company I left behind on the mainland, in case the local rebs get up to something they shouldn't. I assume she'll do the same for you?"

I nodded out of reflex, though I knew Brewer couldn't see it. "That's correct, Major. I'm keeping a direct line with Hayden as well."

"Right. That's good." There was another pause. "And Lieutenant Lloyd, Colonel? Has he uncovered anything else about the ruins or Prometheans?"

"Not yet, but we're heading there as we speak," I answered. "As soon as we're out, I'll give you and Majors Harris and Warfield whatever new data we find. Till then, keep an eye on the Storm and sit tight."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Cooper out."

A small grin formed on my face the moment I cut the connection. Though Major Brewer had tried to hide it well, I knew the real reason she'd asked about the two ONI operatives - and it wasn't to get a hold of information sharing protocol she already knew. I leaned over to Lloyd as we walked and bumped shoulders with him. He seemed a little startled at first, but then the Naval officer took in my expression.

"What is it, Colonel?"

"I just spoke to Major Brewer."

"Oh. And?"

I stifled a chuckle. "Well, she'd make a good spook. The major was very subtle about asking after you. Slipped it into the conversation pretty seamlessly. I was impressed." I reached over and gave his shoulder a friendly squeeze, smirking. "I think she's a keeper, Cal."

The lieutenant rolled his blue eyes at me and snorted. "All right, all right. Enough with the ribbing." A moment later he turned back to me though, looking more serious this time. "But you're sure she's okay?"

"She's fine, Lloyd. Like Porter told us, things've been quiet around here for a bit. And anyway, you'll get to see her soon."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll stop talking now."

"Good. 'Cause here we go." I hefted my rifle to gesture up ahead. "The ruins are just over there."

\* \* \*

><p>We got there a few minutes later, all of us thankful we hadn't run into anything troubling along the way - in the form of ex-Covies or even the new sentient robot things. We passed through both squads of Marines Major Harris had left behind to guard the ruins from the outside, then made our way in and down the ancient steps. When we finally reached the chamber below, Lieutenant Lloyd came out in front of me, with Travis on my six. My younger brother immediately gave a low whistle.<p>

"Damn, Natalie. You weren't kidding when you said this place was big," he said.

"Nope. That's why we've got eight scientists studying every square inch down here."

He gave a short laugh as he continued to look around. "I bet Mom would've loved this. All the brainiacs in here, the relics and stuff, trying to find out who or what left it behind...she would've definitely been in her element."

With my DMR now slung behind my back, I folded my arms across my chest and took a moment to take in the chamber with him. And remember. "Yup. She would've loved to be a part of this, running tests and experiments on everything. Just learning." I swallowed down on the sudden ache in my throat and sighed. "I miss her."

"Me, too, Nat. This brings back a lot of memories."

It did, but unfortunately we didn't have the luxury of lingering down here as long as we wanted. As I watched more Marines begin to file into the chamber, I nodded back to the rest of my brother's demo squad, coming in behind him. I knew we needed to get a move on so we could get back up top in a timely fashion. "All right. Gather your team, Trav, and start your survey. I need to go talk to the lead on this, figure out if they've learned anything new yet."

"Sure thing. I'll let you know when we're done."

"Okay."

Since I didn't know where to start, I looked around the room and caught back up with the spook, using him to steer me toward the group of scientists further down the enormous chamber. Each space in the cavernous room was lit with bright lights - some built into the

structure itself, others more powerful, portable types that the brains had brought with them from the Ex. While Matthew and Porter's squad stood watch at the end of the stairs to the surface and my brother and his team made the rounds to determine good places to potentially set up explosives, Lieutenant Lloyd and I continued walking deeper into the large underground area.

We spotted the first of the scientists crouched by one of the walls with symbols on it - all of which, upon closer inspection, remained unlit. When we'd first entered the chamber a few weeks ago, we'd seen a number of symbols that glowed. I hadn't been sure what it all meant at the time, but then Lloyd had explained the portal system to me a bit. Somehow, the symbols had something to do with how a portal functioned. That was my understanding, at least. It looked like this one might be a dead end.

I figured I could easily get confirmation from the scientist before me. I leaned down a little in his direction to get his attention, reaching out with one arm to brace myself against the wall.

"No, no! Stop!" the man suddenly shouted.

Startled, I immediately took a step back and stood upright, giving him a questioning look. In return, the scientist looked at me like I was a complete dolt.

"That's not to touch," he scolded sharply, scowling at me beneath bushy black-gray eyebrows. His voice held a faint tinge of an accent, but it was so buried beneath the words that I couldn't tell from where. "The portal may look dead, but these things are not entirely understood to us yet, young lady. If any of us were to accidentally activate one, there's no telling where we might end up."

Now that I could rest assured that I hadn't launched us somewhere deep into unknown space without meaning to, I was left to snort at his chosen title for me. "'Young lady' is flattering, Doctor, but I left my twenties behind almost a year ago. I'm not old, but I'm definitely not a green Marine anymore, either."

The old man, probably in his mid- to late seventies, scoffed. "My youngest daughter is fifteen years older than you are, dear. Even thirty is still a child to me." He leaned forward himself this time, peering at me with a slight frown. "Who are you, anyway?"

I stuck out my hand. "Lieutenant Colonel Natalie Cooper, sir. I'm supreme ground commander on this mission."

Somehow, his expression became even more scrutinizing. "Lieutenant colonel, huh? You barely look old enough for major." He shrugged to himself before I could reply. "But the military has always paid little attention to age and focused more on skill instead. I assume you are good at what you do then, Colonel Cooper."

"I try to be, sir."

"Of that I have no doubt. But still, in my field, I am better." With an amused glint in his dark eyes now, the old scientist finally took my hand and shook it. "Doctor Patrick Sean McGuinness, Colonel. What can I do for you?"

I gestured to the inactive wall. "I was hoping you could tell me a little of what you've found so far. And point me in the direction of the lead down here. I was told it was a woman, so obviously you don't fit the bill."

"Aye, she's farther down the chamber, just ahead. Studying an active portal, not like this one." The scientist shifted his focus then from me to the wall with the unlit symbols. "As you may've guessed, this one is dormant."

"Yes, sir. I figured as much. Have you been able to determine where it leads yet? Or used to?"

"Trevelyan."

At the mention of the location, I turned over to the spook and exchanged a quick glance with him. He'd told me about Trevelyan before - a world the UNSC formerly called Onyx. It was an ONI research facility now. Beyond that, though, I didn't have the clearance to know anything else about it. Still, I found it strange that the two places were linked.

Being more knowledgeable about the subject, Lieutenant Lloyd stepped forward then and addressed the older man, his eyes wide.

"Trevelyan? Really? That means we know now that one of the inactive portals found there should be linked up to this." Caleb frowned. "But why isn't it? What could have caused a break?"

"We're looking into it, lad. That's why we're scientists; why we study." He glanced back at us again. "The fact that I discovered the destination at all is a great find on its own."

"No argument there," I said. "Thanks for the information, Doctor McGuinness. We'll come back to speak to you more later."

The old man shooed us away with an arm, no longer looking at us. Instead, his total focus had returned to the dead portal now. "Yes, yes. Go on."

The ONI operative and I did as he said and moved on. Going down the chamber, still brightly lit, I started to inexplicably feel cold.

"That was weird, wasn't it?" I asked Lloyd while we walked. "What are the chances that a colony this far out used to be linked up to a top-secret UNSC research facility?"

"It's actually not very strange if you think about it, ma'am. It makes a lot of sense for these portals to be on some kind of network. The idea that the same several places are linked up to each other is logically sound in my mind."

I frowned in thought. "I guess it is. But I suppose that begs the question, why these locations in particular? I get Trevelyan, since if ONI's there there must be something they found worth studying. But why Khan? Besides the presence of the portals themselves, what makes this such a strategic location that whoever built this place needed instantaneous access to it?"

Lieutenant Lloyd held up his hands in surrender. "I think that's probably way beyond my pay grade, Colonel. But I'd bet my check it might just have something to do with our new buddies."

"The Prometheans, you mean."

"Yes, ma'am." The spook gave me a pointed look. "Their presence here can't be coincidence. I think they're connected somehow. But we'll need some more answers before any of us can determine in what way that might be."

\_Fair enough,\_ I thought to myself. In all honesty, all this deep shit was making my head hurt - literally. The hangover headache continued to linger in the background, less potent than earlier, but still very much there. Hoping to dampen it somewhat, I pulled my canteen from my web belt then and took a long swig of water, then replaced the cap and slipped the thing back onto my hip. This stuff was all miles and away from what I knew best - being a Marine. Combat. Reconstruction. Fighting aliens. Everything else had always been someone else's department - namely the brass and ONI's. Now, thanks to my new rank, it was bleeding into my territory as well. I didn't like it.

Reality could care less how I felt, however. The scientist we were looking for was just a few feet away.

The woman seemed to be around my mother's age at first glance, much younger than the man we'd just met. Probably in her late fifties. She had short gray hair and a simple slate jumpsuit on, likely the kind of garb scientists preferred when working in the field. She was standing near some sort of apparatus I didn't recognize, watching the results of whatever it was she was studying or processing on her datapad. She looked up when she heard us approach.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," she said to me. Then she nodded over to the spook. "Lieutenant Lloyd. I figured I'd be meeting the two of you soon."

"Ma'am?" I asked.

The woman smiled warmly. "I read the lieutenant's file on my way to Khan aboard the Ex. I didn't need to read yours though, Colonel. I knew Doctor Lisa Cooper well."

"You worked with my mom?"

"Oh, yes. On several projects. She had a great mind. Always spoke very highly of you and your siblings. She was quite proud of all of you." Her smile faded fast. "I was sorry to hear of her passing during the War. I'm sure that was hard on you and your brothers and sister."

"Yes, ma'am. It was." I had to swallow hard again. "She died in the bombing of St. Louis five years ago now. She was with my oldest son at the time. I'm damn grateful he made it out alive."

The woman's smile returned. "Lisa loved that little boy with all her heart. She spoke of her grandson often. She'd be glad to know he survived. I understand she was raising him on her own during the conflict while you and your husband were away." She screwed up her

face in thought for a minute. "What is your son's name again?"

"Gabriel Hawk. He's on Mars now with his siblings and their other grandparents."

"Ah." Suddenly she seemed self-conscious. "I apologize, Colonel. I'm sure you're not here to reminisce. I assume you'd like a status report, yes?"

I nodded. "That would be great, Doctor..."

"Jill Leedom. It's good to meet another Cooper."

We shook hands.

"Thank you, ma'am. It's good to meet someone who knew my mother. I'm afraid I wasn't very close to her those last few years, for obvious reasons. I regret that."

"You were off fighting the good fight, Colonel. It's understandable."

I gave a noncommittal shrug and moved on. "So, Doctor? What should I know about this place? My spook here told me earlier that your team had discovered five portals down here. Doctor McGuinness explained to us a little about the one he's studying. What about the others?"

Doctor Leedom glanced at Lloyd. "The lieutenant is correct. When he had come down here last and spoken to my colleague, we had already found all five portals at the time. Now, however, we actually know where they go. One is Trevelyan, inactive, which I'm sure Patrick told you."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Two others are also inactive. One leads to a planet beyond the Outer Colonies which we have mapped yet not traveled to called 'Seffern'." The lead scientist shook her head. "The gibberish about matches what we know of the place - that being not much, unfortunately. The second formerly led to Eridanus II, which I'm sure you're familiar with."

"I am," Lieutenant Lloyd quipped.

I chuckled at the spook's enthusiasm. "Maybe he does, ma'am, but me, not so much. I'm an Inner Colony kid. As much as I bounced around all over thanks to the War, first with my dad and later on myself, I can't say I know about every single planet out there - especially whatever's here in the fringes." I scratched the back of my neck. "Hell, I didn't know anything about Khan either until I was told I'd be sending my engineer battalion to it to help out."

Doctor Leedom opened her mouth to respond, but I noticed Lloyd quickly shoot her a sharp look. Both the scientist and I understood that to be something like "\_\_Keep your mouth shut.\_\_"

Apparently, a further explanation of the significance of Eridanus II wasn't something I rated.

"Well, Colonel. In any case, that is where it leads," Leedom said, transitioning as smoothly as she could. "The remaining pair are even more interesting, however, seeing as they're actually live."

Caleb shifted his stance beside me. "And where do those go, ma'am?"

"The first, on the opposite side of the chamber, goes to Sanghelios."

The ONI operative and I both let a gasp.

"The Elites' homeworld," I murmured. "Holy shit." Implications instantly flooded my head, but before I could make sense of most of them, the scientist who'd worked with my mother went on.

"Correct, Cooper. And the final active portal, the one I'm standing beside, leads to Requiem."

## 28. Chapter 27: Last of the Group

### **\*\*Chapter Twenty-Seven: Last of the Group\*\***

Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd seemed to know immediately what Doctor Leedom was talking about; the surprise and recognition were clear on his face. Once again, however, like with the significance of Eridanus II, I was left in the dark. I looked from the lead scientist to the spook, hoping to read something in their expressions, but again Lloyd shook his head.

At least he addressed me directly about it this time.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry, but in anticipation of your question, I haven't been cleared to brief you on Requiem yet," the ONI operative said. "I realize this leaves you in a bit of a bind command-wise, but I promise I'll let you know what I can as soon as clearance has been granted."

I frowned, annoyed not because I was being left out of the loop for security reasons, but because the intelligence I was being denied could have a drastic effect on the well-being of my Marines - all fifteen hundred of them. "Has a request even been sent to your superiors, Cal?"

Lieutenant Lloyd let out a sigh, obviously unsure how much he should say. "I filed a request with Captain Rhodes just before the Affair was destroyed so he could forward it to Admiral Dartmouth for review, Colonel. I'm not sure if the message made it out or not. Rhodes himself may know, but until the Excalibur comes back in orbit...I have no way to tell."

"Great," I muttered. "Till then I'm flying blind."

"Again, ma'am. I'm...sorry."

I waved a dismissive hand at him. "It's okay, Cal. I know you're just following ONI protocol. But it's damned irritating nonetheless."



The spook gave a small twitch of his lips. "I'll leave a note for the brass in the 'questions and comments' section of their PR department, ma'am."

"Hilarious, Lieutenant," I sniped back.

In the meantime, Doctor Jill Leedom cleared her throat beside us. "There's more I'd like to impart, Cooper."

"Please," I prompted.

She finally lowered the datapad she'd been studying since we'd arrived and took a step away from her strange technical apparatus - strange to me, anyway. It also didn't escape my notice that she was with her back to the active portal now, too. Not something I would have been comfortable with, given the fact that we didn't know what sort of light-up button press might send us into outer space...but then again I wasn't one of the brains.

"I read in a report one of your Marines filed, a Captain Ashlee Sogaard with the 904th Infantry Battalion, that you discovered an underground passage along the shore that led to this chamber," Leedom said. "You wanted us to find out if there were any more like it in the ruins."

"Yes, ma'am. I've wondered that for a while. What did you find?"

"Curiously, just one additional passageway, Colonel. It's actually not far from the main set of stairs, but it's very well-hidden." She frowned then. "I'm afraid with the premium placed on discovering the destinations linked to the portals, however, we have not been given enough time yet to explore the new tunnel."

"I'd say that's the next priority then, Doctor. At least for us ground troops. It'd be nice to know if we're about to get jumped by the enemy beforehand."

Next to me, the spook gave a snort. "Which one?"

My mouth quirked in a grim smile. "We certainly have the pick of the litter, don't we?"

The lead scientist ignored us and sighed. "Very well, Cooper. We'll take your suggestion under advisement and continue our studies here; there is still plenty of work to be done with regards to the portals as well, but I understand that something like the underground tunnels are a pressing issue to your Marines. We'll do our best to gather information for you as quickly as possible."

"Thanks," I replied. "I'd appreciate it."

We shook hands again and then Lloyd and I moved off back towards the main part of the chamber, where the rest of the Marines were, still standing guard. As soon as we turned back, Caleb glanced over at me.

"So what now, ma'am?" he asked.

I adjusted the strap of my DMR over my torso armor before answering,

feeling a little weary but knowing there was still lots more to do. "I need to go talk to my brother about possibly setting charges in this place, as a last resort. Go ahead and keep chatting with the other scientists if you want, see if they have anything else to add about any of the portals, or the underground passage. Otherwise you can join Staff Sergeant Porter's squad at the entrance. They can always use an extra hand."

"Got it, Colonel."

Lieutenant Lloyd left my company then and I spotted my younger brother making his way across the chamber, either still in the process of mapping things or returning to the stairs all finished. I caught him as he came around the circular room and lifted my chin at him to get his attention.

"Done yet, Trav?"

He shrugged, looking as tired as I felt. "It's a big place, Nat. Might take us some time to get it all rigged."

"It's possible, though?"

"In theory. We've found places in the walls that look structurally weak and can most likely give us the best bang for our buck if we need it. Given the stuff we're dealing with down here, though, I'm not sure how effective the ordnance might be. Alien tech can have reinforced barriers we can't detect or...something. I don't know."

"Right." I let out a sigh myself this time. "Well, if this is the best we can do, we do it. It's better than nothing. I'd rather try and fail than not give it our all."

"With you there, sis."

"If you think you need more input, I'd go talk to some of the scient  
- "

Something that felt a lot like the kind of explosion we were just talking about suddenly rocked the earth beneath our boots. Deeper within the chamber I heard screams, but they didn't sound like they were coming from anyone by the entrance. It sounded like it was coming from the direction of the scientists.

"Fucking hell," I growled.

As soon as the light dusting of debris from the ceiling stopped pinging off our helmets, I keyed the COM and barked, "What the hell was that?"

But no one answered. There wasn't even static. My pulse spiked until I remembered that last time we were down here, the COM hadn't worked, either. I quietly cursed and repeated my words aloud, shouting this time to be heard through the room. It was one of Travis's Marines that responded.

"Ma'am, we don't know! Something just came through the portals!"

Travis and I didn't even have time to share a quick glance - both of us were off and running in an instant, heading back toward the scientists with our weapons raised. For a brief moment I marveled at the fact that we weren't all six feet under right now, buried in the ruins from the detonation. But the chamber, though ancient, still appeared to be fairly sturdy. I wondered if my little brother wasn't right in his assessment of the place - if our explosives would even work in here.

The sound of another scream broke through my thoughts and I ran faster, going at a full sprint now. "Marines, push forward, now! Cover the scientists and get them out!"

Thankfully, by the time Travis and I got there, my brother's demo team wasn't far behind. Being the furthest from the action, it was Staff Sergeant Porter's squad that still had to race to catch up.

As a couple of the brains ran past us, looking terrified as all hell, Travis and I burst ahead, loosing the first rounds of the battle on our side. I squeezed off several three-round bursts, nailing two of the robot dogs that were leaping towards us just as fast as we were gunning for them. That ended the debate of what the sudden explosion had been pretty quick.

"Jesus, Natalie! What the fuck are these things?" Travis shouted beside me while he unleashed a firestorm of bullets from his MA5D.

"Our new neighbors on the island! Prometheans!"

"What?!"

"Just keep shooting!"

I didn't exactly have the luxury of explaining things in full detail at the moment - or very much at all. Right now I had the lives of eight scientists to oversee, as well as the Marines who'd come in here with us. Our new enemy popping randomly out of one of the portals definitely took priority over filling my brother in on the stats.

Crouching on one knee as I burned through my whole clip at a fast pace, I heard the sound of thundering boots and increased gunfire coming from behind us in the chamber. It was Travis's team. I quickly gestured at my brother to get his attention and yelled, "Trav! Get one of your Marines to head topside, now! Tell the two security squads outside that we have a situation!"

"On it!"

To Travis's credit, he didn't take his eyes off the oncoming enemy or stop shooting as he relayed my orders to one of his PFCs. The Marine got the message immediately and did an abrupt about-face, hoofing it to the stairs. I just hoped we could hold off the Prometheans long enough to get our civvies out.

Seeing that there were more and more AI troops emerging from deeper in the chamber, I slipped my finger off the trigger and started to reach for a frag on my web belt - anything to stem the tide. But I realized quickly that I wasn't prepared to do anything that might

damage the portals just yet - there was still a lot we needed to glean from them first. I stilled my hand and reached for a new mag instead, letting two of Travis's Marines come up next to me to cover while I reloaded.

Apparently, our new friends weren't as eager to be mindful of our surroundings.

"Natalie! Watch out!"

I turned just in time to get bulldozed by my brother, heavy gear and all. I knew he meant well but his weight was crushing, enough that the air went right out of my lungs the second I hit the ground. I landed flat on my back looking up at the ceiling, gasping for oxygen, and saw the yellow-orange sphere of light that had spooked him above us. It was the Prometheans' stand-in for grenades, some sort of contraption loaded with an EMP pulse.

"Trav, it's okay. Let me up!"

"Are you crazy? That grenade's about to - !"

Suddenly the light imploded, the wave warping through us and temporarily shutting down our electronics as it went. Travis blinked and finally released me, looking confused.

"EMP blast," I coughed out when I could breathe again. "Now please, try not to do more harm than good, little bro."

"Sorry. I just thought - "

I stopped listening at that point. His thinking had led to a lot of aches and pains for me around my old wounds - especially the gunshots. My chest was on fire and so was my shoulder, reminders that I'd only narrowly escaped a bad fate at the hands of Jackal snipers a month and a half ago.

And now, if we didn't wrap this up quick and take the fight upstairs, it was going to end even worse for us here today.

Luckily I heard a new rush of boots behind us then - Porter's squad had finally arrived.

Over the sound of all the gunfire and incoming light rounds from the Prometheans we faced, I glanced back at the staff sergeant and shouted, "Get me some fire on those bots, right now! We need the scientists secured and then we hightail it out, understood?"

My aide gave a brief nod, hefting his SAW. "Yes, ma'am!"

Once Porter established a steady stream of suppressive fire, a handful of his Marines dutifully jumped into the fray, pushing through row after row of the AI-bots to break through and search for the rest of the brains who were missing. I wished for a COM connection so I could ask how many had already made it behind our line of Marines to safety, but for now I had to rely on the simple fact that not all of them were quite yet. No matter how many were left to recover, we had to get to them.

Given my rank, it should've been up to someone else, but I wasn't

about to kick back and let my men and women do all the work. Amid sharp protests from my aide and my brother, I rushed in behind Porter's Marines, tagging each Promethean fighter I could with my DMR as I went. In the meantime, the staff sergeant poured a hail of lead at the fast-approaching Crawlers, continuing to cover us from behind. I ran past one that was just about to leap up at me while I aimed at a nearby Watcher, further ahead. I ducked fast and the doggy robot suddenly sparked in mid-air from the storm of bullets, then came crashing down in a pile of singed pieces beside me.

"Keep pushing forward!" I yelled, loosing another burst of fire from my gun. "Let's go!"

Porter's Marines raced ahead in front of me, using their weapons as well as brute strength to get through. We were in the middle of a throng of Prometheans now, fighting in close quarters. The battle was chaotic as the Knights kept teleporting in and out a few meters apart, their shield/fire support drones, the Watchers, hovering over them and providing lethal cover - that is, when they weren't on the wrong end of my trigger pulls.

While I struggled to keep up with the pace of the drones above us, I watched out of the corner of my eye as one Marine pulled the trigger of his shotgun point-blank on a Knight. The most formidable Promethean took the hit and stumbled backward, but regained its footing amazingly fast and went in for a swipe with its purple blade of light. I wanted to scream out a warning but I didn't have enough time, and the Marine took the sword in the gut, his eyes going wide as the thing passed right through his middle and out his back. Now that he was dead, the Promethean Knight flung his body to the side and kept coming.

"Fuck that," I muttered in a low growl. "You're mine."

I didn't have a shotgun on me which would've served me well, but I did have another ace up my sleeve. Not knowing how the object might react to me, I picked up one of the yellow-orange orbs off the ground from a dead Knight and squeezed it in my hand, willing it to activate. Something must've worked because it started to glow, and I knew it was primed. I called out to the rest of Porter's squad to let them know it was coming, then chucked it right at the Knight.

I had to roll out of the way to avoid the incoming fire from the others, but I came up on one knee again and aimed a tight burst at the last remaining Watcher surrounding the Knight. It exploded in a shower of hot metal parts that bounced off the chamber floor, and I ducked a second time to wait out the rain of debris. It ended just as the EMP pulse burst inward, and the Knight looked frazzled for the briefest of moments. I took the opportunity to redirect my aim and fired off two more bursts. The wounded AI-bot instantly morphed into a million shards of yellow light, then disappeared.

With my heart pounding in my chest, I felt like I needed a minute to collect myself after the close call. But there wasn't time. That was just one Knight in a sea of them, and they were all pressing back just as we were trying to press forward. Two more of Porter's Marines took hits of light rounds to the chest, gut, and neck, and once they were down I realized this was a battle that wasn't going to be won here.

"I need a head count on the scientists!" I yelled above the din as I moved to let off another burst from my DMR, only to find my weapon \_click\_ing at me. My new mag was spent. I cursed and reached into a pocket of my uniform pants for a fresh one. "If we don't have someone, find them and fall back!"

Someone cried out, "Ma'am, six scientists are accounted for and are already being rushed up the stairs! I've got one in sight and one missing!"

"Who do you have in line-of-sight, Marine?"

"Doctor McGuinness, Colonel!"

"All right, get him out of here! The rest of us will search for who's absent!"

Much to my surprise, the Marine shook his head hard. "We're not evacuating McGuinness, ma'am. He's dead."

"\_What?\_"

"Took one of those light rounds through the head. It's Doctor Leedom who's MIA."

Still trying to get over the shock, I replied more quietly but with conviction, "We'll find her."

\_Christ,\_ I thought to myself as I finished reloading my rifle. \_I was just talking to the guy not ten minutes ago. Now he's dead.\_

It was a testament to how quickly things could change in combat. The same thing had happened to me with my best friends, First Lieutenant Dean Lewis and Major Oliver Hayden, too. One minute they'd been my carefree buddies, sharing jokes and ribbing each other or talking about our families back home...and the next they'd been piles of carnage left behind in the Covenant and Storm's wake. Things like that I could never get used to - not even in over a decade as a Marine.

"Colonel! I've got her!"

I turned to my left at the shout and saw Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd coming through the mass of Prometheans towards us, one of his arms wrapped around an older woman's shoulder. Her face was a little bloodied from a gash on her head, but I could tell who she was - it was Leedom. I felt the relief literally wash over me when I saw they were both okay, despite the hairy situation we still found ourselves in.

"Great, let's haul ass out of here then! Marines, provide cover fire while we get the last scientist out! Then we hoof it up the stairs! \_Go!\_"

With my rifle newly loaded again, I shoved Lloyd's back as he passed me to keep him moving himself and Doctor Leedom towards the exit. Then I backpedaled, too, as soon as they were safely behind me and Porter's Marines, and motioned for them to begin retreating as well. All the while we fired round after round and burst after burst at the enemy, dodging what they threw at us and making sure our own volleys

hit home. It was a study in bright flashes of light, sudden losses of our helmet electronics, rapid bursts of gunfire, and dozens of light rounds \_ping\_ing off the walls and floors of the place.

Finally, though, we'd created enough distance to start running up the stairs ourselves.

"Marines, \_move\_! We need to get topside ahead of these bastards and form a perimeter! We are not losing Qamar, no matter how many come out! Let's go!"

I shouted the command as my magazine \_click\_ed empty yet again, and at the same time, I got a quick but stern look from Staff Sergeant Porter. He didn't even need to ask me nicely to be the first to run up the stairs; I already knew he wouldn't allow me to remain behind until the last of the Marines were safe, like I wanted to.

As a lieutenant colonel I'd become too valuable to really lead and fight the way I felt I should. But what pushed me forward was the thought that my Marines were probably better off with me than without.

After one last burst of gunfire and a backward glance, I grit my teeth to keep from biting out a heartfelt "Fuck you" to the Prometheans, and sprinted up the many ancient steps to the surface.

## 29. Chapter 28: Fight to the Finish

### **\*\*Chapter Twenty-Eight: Fight to the Finish\*\***

When I finally emerged at the summit of the steps, I instinctively let go of my rifle with one hand and placed it over my chest. My heart was pounding hard beneath my torso armor, which wasn't unusual after the hard sprint up that many stairs - it was the intense pain that came with it that was odd. It felt worse than when Travis had pounced on me inside the chamber to protect me from what he thought was an impending explosion, and I had to say that it had me a little worried.

I hadn't forgotten that only six weeks ago, I'd gone into a trauma-induced cardiac arrest and had been dead for five whole minutes after I'd been shot twice in the back with bullets from a 99-S5 - given to the Jackal arms dealers that had pulled the trigger on me by my favorite local rebel, Laraza. And as I'd said many times before, I was way too young for heart problems...but I guess getting sniped through the chest by armor-piercing rounds would do it.

One of Travis's Marines who'd come out ahead of me saw me stumbling onto the surface as I held a hand to my body armor, and he quickly came to my side.

"Ma'am? Are you hit?"

For a moment I gave him a bewildered look, then I took a deep breath and swallowed, shaking my head. "No, Sergeant. I'm fine."

I kept clutching at my chest though until my breathing evened out and the pain finally began to subside. By then nearly a minute had

passed, and now, rather than worrying I was about to have another damn heart attack, I worried about Porter and the rest of his Marines' safety. It'd been too long and they should've come out by now.

"Marines, watch the entrance!" I shouted over the COM, which finally worked out here. "And make sure whatever comes out is hostile before you pull that trigger!"

Acknowledgment lights flashed green, and just as I turned behind me to see where Lieutenant Lloyd and Doctor Leedom had gone, I heard something coming up the steps.

A small burst of relief went through me when I saw that the sound was the pounding of a Marine's boots on the ancient stairs – one of Porter's men. He was followed quickly by another Marine, then another, and a handful more made it out until the staff sergeant himself came bursting from the entrance at a low crouch, SAW firmly in his hands.

He looked up at me with a red face and wide blue eyes as he reached the outside. "Colonel, they're coming!"

I nodded at him and keyed the radio again. "Marines, you heard the Staff Sergeant! Get ready!"

Luckily the two squads already standing guard outside had a thirty caliber machine gun with them – it wasn't as useful as the fifty I would've liked in a situation like this, but it would help for the moment. I hoped.

"Don't fire until I give the order!"

We all stood for several more agonizingly long seconds until I heard the sound again of something rushing up the steps – but this time, I knew it wasn't going to be friendly in the least. I gripped my DMR tight and held the weapon hard against my shoulder, ready to fire off that first burst as soon as the Prometheans came out.

I waited till the very last moment to shout, "All right! Open up!"

The thirty cal was the first to start blazing, followed by Porter's SAW and a couple dozen other guns as several Crawlers bounded out of the entrance ahead of the rest. Against our sudden onslaught, the initial wave had no chance, and by the time the dust settled for the briefest of seconds, six of the doggy robots could be seen lying in heaps of sparking metal in the sandy dirt.

I still had over half my mag left as I stood there beside the rest of the Marines, waiting for the remainder of the Promethean crowd to show up. I knew I wasn't going to be disappointed – in fact, my expectations were exceeded in a big way.

"Oh, shit!"

I turned fast to face the corporal who'd just shouted, then my eyes just about bugged out of my head when I saw what it was. It was a Knight, freshly teleported out of the ruins and standing right in front of us now. I backpedaled without a second thought and shoved



the stunned Marine back with me, pulling the trigger of my DMR in bursts as fast as I could.

"Watch it, Corporal! If he gets too close, he'll gut you!" I yelled at the junior noncom. "Don't stop shooting!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Between the two of us we were actually doing pretty good against the Knight, but then one of its protector drones flew over from among the enemy horde emerging from the ruins and put up a shield around him. Knowing the Watcher was about to open fire on us next, I quickly switched my aim from the Knight to the drone and emptied my clip.

\_Shit,\_ I thought to myself then, dropping the DMR to the ground and pulling out my pistol, since pausing to reload the rifle in the middle of all this would certainly take me to an early grave. \_This always happens at the worst damn times.\_

Thankfully though, my aide had recognized our predicament. Moving to cover our flank now, Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter aimed up at once just like I had, finished off the Watcher with a long burst of fire and a mini explosion of tearing metal, then directed his rapid-fire weapon at the Knight.

"Colonel, get back!" he shouted at me. "It's not safe! We need more firepower!"

"I know, Staff!" I cried in return. "We'll get it!"

Scrambling backward, I fired off another few rounds from my pistol, then bent quickly to pick up my discarded rifle and retreat behind the main line of Marines. I hated doing it, but I really needed to reload - my sidearm wasn't doing much damage anyway, and I knew my job was no longer to be directly involved in the fight if I could help it. Instead, I needed to make sure we had ample support here at the entrance now that the Prometheans had made it through one of the portals and seemed pretty hellbent on taking us all on at once. Crouching beside the Marine manning the thirty cal gun, I rapidly holstered my pistol, swapped out mags for my DMR, and then hit the COM again to the closest battalion commander.

"Brewer, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper! We need backup, right now! We've got Prometheans crawling out of the ruins fast! More than our guards can handle!"

The reply was almost instant. "On our way, ma'am! We're coming up on your six! ETA one minute!"

"Excellent! Cooper out!"

I ended the call feeling marginally relieved, but knew that the hard part now was going to be lasting amongst this chaos for another sixty seconds. In the heat of battle, even a few minutes felt like an eternity - especially when you were outnumbered and waiting on reinforcements. I knew that from numerous past experiences on a number of different planets. Waiting sucked.

Now that I'd hailed some help, and with my rifle boasting a full load

once more, I propped my DMR against our cover and looked down the sights to aid in the fight. I still hadn't seen the spook or the lead doctor and part of me wondered again where they went, but it wasn't something I could stop to check up on just yet. First, this had to be contained.

Just in front of me and to the right, I could see Porter still hammering away at the oncoming tide with his SAW, moving quickly and with precision from a group of Crawlers to the drones and then back to a close-approaching Knight. I aimed at the big baddie myself, hoping to free up the staff sergeant for other targets, firing burst after burst until I watched the robotic bastard disintegrate into nothing.

The number of Prometheans that had come out to play now was huge, though - the largest congregation of them that I'd seen so far. Now that we weren't inside the ruins anymore, I figured it was high time to use some explosives.

Pulling a frag grenade off my web belt as I leaned into my gun, I opened a COM channel and said, "Marines, you're free to use everything you've got! We're clear of the main site now, so start tossing those grenades in to disperse the crowd!"

After yelling out a warning to my men, I threw the first pitch myself, making sure I chucked the frag far enough to arch over the line of Marines and fall right into the mixed bag of AI bots. The small explosive detonated after only a few seconds' delay, sending a plume of screeching metal parts, dirt, and sand bursting into the air. I didn't know what it was that I'd hit until I saw fragments of the Fido-bots amongst the debris, as well as an arm from one of the Knights. The big bastard itself was still active, though, but I remedied that quickly with two more bursts from my DMR.

Once the Knight had disappeared with its brief, imploding light show, I took a moment to look over my shoulder to see if any of Major Brewer's Marines were on approach yet. To me it felt like well over a minute had already passed, but that could've easily been the time dilation. I didn't know for sure until I turned back to the fight again, rattled off a burst, and heard the hail come in over the COM.

"Colonel, this is Major Brewer! Help is on the way, but I thought we could use an extra hand!"

I paused long enough to frown and wonder what she meant, but I didn't have to think on that one too long. I heard the large machine stomping around behind us and start to fire up its mounted MGs before I registered what it was. When I did, I grinned beneath my helmet. It was the Mantis.

"Marines, make way! Mantis-one on approach!"

The operator inside had made the announcement before I could, and I gladly relinquished my position to its superior firepower. Porter had asked for more, and we'd certainly gotten it. As soon as the Mantis opened up with its guns and M41 rockets, the landscape of the skirmish changed drastically.

"Mantis-one, watch the heavy ordnance!" I shouted through the COM.

"We don't want anything breaking off chunks of the old ruins! Just the AIs!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

With the big Mantis beast at our backs now, and Brewer's Marines coming in behind as well, things looked a lot better than when we'd first resurfaced. But there was still a long way to go, and plenty of Promethean fighters to burn through.

I could only hope the rest of my battalions were still containing the situation on Qamar with the Storm as well. Fighting one of the enemy factions was taxing enough - if we ever had to fight both at the same time, it'd be tough, even with our newly arrived third battalion of men.

\* \* \*

><p>The Mantis was still doing much of the heavy lifting when Marines from the 213th started moving in. They were considerably later than Brewer had projected, but since she'd procured us the Mantis, I couldn't fault her for that too much. I knew how things could change unexpectedly in combat, and I was grateful we'd had a formidable stand-in for extra troops while we'd waited. Still, the more Marines the merrier, because things were about to get even worse.<p>

In the blink of an eye, a Knight teleported directly behind one of the sergeants in front of me. I saw him twist to go for the Promethean at the same time I shifted my DMR's aim to help him out, but neither his reflexes nor mine were quite quick enough. The Knight hammered into him with the butt of its weapon, one of the shotgun-like light guns some of them carried, and then used the split-second that the Marine faltered to blast a deep hole in the man's gut. The Marine staggered as I let out a guttural scream of frustrated shock, then his body jerked forward, unceremoniously hitting the tan dirt. With adrenaline pumping into my veins now and raw fury sweeping through me, I ignored my old injuries, my dormant heart condition, and my rank and lunged.

Bounding over the cover with my weapon in hand, I ran up to the Knight and into the fray amid a storm of light rounds and bullets and explosions. I wasn't really sure what I thought I was doing with nothing but a mid-range weapon and a pistol at close quarters, but I was determined to do something about that sergeant who'd died. It could've just as easily been Matt, or my brother, or Cal - and I was done losing friends to aliens and robots and other people alike.

"You son of a bitch!"

I squeezed the trigger of my DMR and fired point-blank, not bothering with the scope since the Promethean was damn well nearly on top of me. The first few rounds were simply absorbed by the large AI-bot - but the next few weren't. The mechanical bastard started to spark, and with that, I watched as it's purple light blade emerged.

It was funny, because I had a blade of my own for it, too. With another magazine spent, I slung my DMR behind my back and pulled out my combat knife, striking first. I wasn't sure how much damage it would do against the robot, but I supposed I'd find out.

I struck what passed for its armor-plated chest and even more bright sparks of light burst forth from the sentient AI. It let out a sort of mechanical wail, then shoved me harder than I thought possible, forcing me on my ass. Realizing pretty quick that I'd made a colossal mistake in trying to take it on so rashly, I scrambled backward, buying time so I could sheathe my knife and pull out my sidearm instead. It almost worked...except the Promethean Knight struck again.

The thing tried to smash into me while I was on the ground, first with its light blade, then with its weapon. It missed the first time when I rolled out of the way, and the second time, I brought my legs up to my chest and kicked the metallic son of a bitch as hard as I could with both of my boots. The Knight didn't even stumble back, but it did relent its attack for just a second or two, and I used that to my advantage. I fired off four rounds from my pistol in rapid succession, hoping to bring it down.

Of course, even though the thing was pretty damaged by now, that still wasn't enough. I could've ended it with another burst from my DMR, but it was left unloaded on my back still and I had no time to change out mags in the moment. I was left in a bind until I heard a trio of bullets from a battle rifle strike the Knight from the side.

Craning my neck to see, I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I saw it was Lieutenant Lloyd. I was glad to see him alive, and I was damn happy to know I wasn't about to die from my own stupidity, too. As the Promethean finally warped out of existence, I sat in the dirt for a minute, breathing hard.

"Damn, Lieutenant. Couldn't've...come in at a better time," I said.

Caleb grinned and stuck out his hand for me to take. "Glad I could help, ma'am. Let's get you up."

I took his hand and let him haul me to my feet; I still felt a little shaky from the adrenaline and close call. My heart was pounding hard in my chest, as always, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary like it had before. I released a long breath, then looked up to take in the rest of the skirmish.

"How're we doing so far, Cal? And where's Leedom and the rest of the scientists?"

"Safe, ma'am. One of the lieutenants from Major Brewer's battalion came and brought them behind the lines. From my understanding, they're with her XO now."

I nodded. "And Brewer herself?"

"Don't know, ma'am. Haven't seen her yet."

I gave him a look and a slap on the shoulder as I reloaded my DMR for what felt like the hundredth time since the Prometheans had shown up, then cocked the rifle and brought it to bear again. I could tell the ONI operative was worried about the 213th's commander.

"I'm sure she's fine, Lloyd. We would've heard if she wasn't."

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

I gestured to what was left of the still forward-pushing AI machines, glad to see their numbers were finally dwindling. "Let's finish this up, Cal, and then we'll see."

\* \* \*

><p>Several minutes later, it was all over, at least for now. I had my Marines stay and watch the entrance for ten more minutes just to be safe, to make sure there weren't anymore Prometheans on the loose that had yet to make their way up the stairs, or more that had arrived through the portals. But they didn't. Once the skirmish had come to an end, it was quiet.<p>

"Damn, Colonel," Caleb whispered beside me. "I think we did it."

"Yeah, we did. But not everybody made it out," I replied wearily.

"You're talking about Doctor McGuinness, right?"

"And a handful of our Marines, too. I need to get the full count from Doc Reynolds just as soon as we know the rest of our brains are okay."

With that, I opened a private channel to both Travis and Matthew to make sure my most immediate concerns were quelled. After hearing they were fine, I nodded to myself and started to get underway with all the other things I needed to do. That's when I heard the spent Mantis begin to stomp away, back near the command tent to get rearmed for the next fight...and someone else on approach.

Major Dani Brewer came over to the spook and I with a DMR in her hands, too. Her uniform looked fresher than ours but still a little dirtied from the fighting that had just occurred. And judging by one of the scorch marks down her pants leg, she'd been in the thick of it somewhere within the melee just like us. The 213th Infantry Battalion's CO looked to me first.

"Colonel Cooper, ma'am. I'm sorry we got here a little late, but I hope the Mantis made up the difference for a while."

"It did, Major. Good call sending in our big beast."

"Thank you, ma'am." Only then did she look over at Caleb, and I noticed the two smiling at each other. "Lieutenant."

"Ma'am," Lloyd answered.

"It's good to see you're all right."

"You too, ma'am."

I could tell they wanted to say a lot more to each other after what had just occurred, but neither would do so in my presence. They were too professional for that, something I respected them both for. I

shifted my stance and balanced the weight of the rifle in my hands.

"Well, I've got to check up on the scientists, our casualties, and the wounded," I said then. "And see how Harris and Warfield are doing handling the Storm for now. Major Brewer, come find me when things get wrapped up out here."

"I will, Colonel."

I left the two of them standing alone for a moment, giving them some time to say what they really needed to face-to-face. I hadn't gotten the same chance before Willis's bird had gone down, and now, with his prognosis bleak, I didn't really know if I ever would.

### 30. Chapter 29: Trials

#### **\*\*Chapter Twenty-Nine: Trials\*\***

Everything looked to be in rough shape after the unexpected fight with the Prometheans. Now more than ever, I was convinced that my contingency plan of rigging the underground chamber to blow at a moment's notice was necessary - one minute we'd been safely scrutinizing the old ruins beneath the surface, the next we'd been driven out by a veritable army of AI-bots intent on decimating our forces. And if it hadn't been for Brewer's Marines and the Mantis, they may well have. I didn't want anything like that to happen again, but if it did, this time, we'd be more than prepared.

I went to look for my younger brother first after the skirmish ended. Before I could move on to anything else, I knew we needed the area secure. I wasn't going to send the scientists back in until I was sure it was safe to do so, and we needed them down there again as soon as possible to continue uncovering the chamber's secrets.

Strangely, I found Travis standing near the entrance with Matt, both keeping their rifles low but ready in hand in case anything else jumped out. I nodded to them as I walked up, still gripping my DMR in my hands.

"Hey, Nat," Travis said. "That was the last of them, right?"

"We think so," I replied. "Only way to know for sure is to send down a team."

"I'll go."

"No. Before we do anything else, we need to make sure those portals are as secure as we can make them."

My brother let out a snort. "Come on, sis. You know the only way to do that is to let us rig the place. If you blow those robot fuckers to kingdom come, ain't none of them making a problem for us again."

"Travis - "

"Natalie," he countered. "This is my job. Let me do it." He gave me a

light jab in the arm. "Just 'cause I'm your little brother doesn't mean I need protecting all the time. I can do this, and my team and I will handle the Pros if we wake more of them up."

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "'Pros'?"

"You know, the Prometheans. That's what I'm calling them."

"Right...don't be offended if that doesn't catch on."

"I hate to butt in, Nat, but I think he's right," Matthew said then. "Quickest way to make sure that place is the safest it can be is to get it ready for the worst."

I cradled my gun against my torso armor and frowned. "I'm not saying we shouldn't rig the ruins. I think that's what's needed at this point, too. I just want to be sure you'll be okay while you're down there doing it, Trav. The Prometheans came out of nowhere. They can easily do that again."

"Then send us back down there with a bigger team," Travis suggested. "They'll watch, we'll rig."

"Yeah. And I volunteer to stand guard," Willis's baby brother chimed in.

I snorted. "Will would love to hear about that when he wakes up. No."

"But - "

"Matt, you like to tell us every chance you get that you're all grown up, but sometimes you channel your little nephews too much. I said no, not as long as I'm in charge. You can help outside the ruins, but you're not going back inside where we barely got out alive just now. Got it?"

Matthew released a sigh. "Yes."

"Good." I looked to my own brother then and relented. In the end, we all knew this was the only way to do it. "Fine, Trav. I'm giving you and your team the go-ahead. Rig the whole damn place down there to blow. You'll get two platoons of Marines to go with you this time - that's about all we can fit without things getting too crowded for maneuvers. But listen, the very second you suspect anything might be coming through any of the portals - Storm, Prometheans, whatever the hell else - you haul ass out of there. Everyone, no exceptions. And send someone ahead to warn the rest. I won't ask the scientists to go back down there until I know we're in the clear."

"Or as close to it as we can be," my brother amended.

"Right. Understood?"

Travis nodded. "Yes, ma'am. We'll get to work."

"All right. Well, you both know what to do next. Just promise you'll stay safe, for me and for Willis."

What none of us mentioned was the fact that we still didn't even really know if the explosives would work. The ruins were ancient but the place had proven to be formidable during the skirmish nonetheless. But like I'd told Travis before, I was determined to at least try. And for now, it was all we could really do to keep things contained.

The Covenant had glassed the other half of Khan during the War. This was the only half left. I'd be damned if I let the Storm have it now â€" or the Prometheans.

\* \* \*

><p>Once I'd spoken to Travis and my brother-in-law and made arrangements to keep the entrance to the ruins covered for the foreseeable future, I started to head back to the medical tent. I figured most if not all the scientists who'd made it out would be nearby, hopefully being kept safely by the command tent. I wanted to talk to Doc Reynolds about our dead and wounded as well - and see how Doctor Leedom was doing.<p>

On my way there, I made sure to contact Majors Harris and Warfield to get a sitrep on their sectors, too. It seemed like most of the excitement had been in our neck of the woods. I was grateful for that, since I wasn't really sure I could handle much more crisis at this point. One invasion, one dead scientist, one husband in a coma, and one big surprise attack - plus a hefty hangover - were just about all I could take on at one time.

I paused just before I went inside the medtent to sling my rifle over my shoulder and took a long gulp of water from my canteen. This was the first time since landing back on the island that I'd had a minute to collect myself before moving on to the next task. Captain Rhodes hadn't been kidding when he said things got worse the further up the chain you went. \_Hope we see you back soon, sir,\_ I thought to myself. \_We could really use the help, because somewhere up there, we've still got a Storm ship on our ass.\_

Once I'd downed all I could stomach, I steeled myself for more headaches and walked in.

Like I thought might be the case, Reynolds was hard at work on a patient, so he didn't look up when I entered. It was only when I was standing a few feet away and pulled off my helmet that I noticed who he was tending to - the head scientist herself.

"Doctor Leedom, ma'am," I said. "How are you doing?"

The expression on her face said she was a little shaken up from what had just happened. Reynolds looked to be almost finished patching up the gash on her head, though, and the rest of the wound had already been cleaned up as well. She looked over at me with hollow eyes.

"Fine, Cooper. Just a...scrape."

Beside us, the medic scoffed and gave me a pointed glance. "Trying to take a page out of the colonel's playbook won't work with me, Doctor - or her, either. She's a master at \_attempting\_ to cover up how bad off she is. And I'd say your 'scrape' was more than moderate."



I folded my arms across my chest. "How bad?"

"No concussion or fractured skull, but it bled a hell of a lot. I just finished putting in nine stitches."

"A piece of the ceiling came down on my head when the Prometheans arrived," Leedom explained. "I was dizzy and disoriented and I saw them coming and I thought..." She swallowed, then shook her head. "I've seen a lot in my line of work, but this...this is as close to the 'action' as I ever want to get."

"You were lucky Lieutenant Lloyd came to rescue you."

"Yes, Colonel. Please let him know his help was very timely...and much appreciated."

I smiled a little wearily. "He just saved my ass out there, too, from a Knight. He's a good guy." I shifted uncomfortably then, not wanting to be the bearer of bad news. But someone had to tell her, and Reynolds didn't know. "Doctor, there's something...one of your colleagues didn't make it out."

The shock registered instantly on her face. "Who?"

"Doctor McGuinness. I'm really sorry."

"Oh, no. Patrick," she breathed. She shut her eyes tight and was silent a moment before taking in a deep breath. "The research will suffer without him. He was brilliant in his field." The head scientist gave a sad sigh. "And he was a sweet old man. I know he had his...personality quirks. But he meant well."

It was quiet for a while after that; it seemed neither Reynolds nor I knew what to say for comfort. The two of us were in a profession where death was just as much a part of things as life - if not more so. Hell, it'd been only a month ago now that my best friend had been killed in the fighting against the Storm. I'd lost many before that who were close to me, too. And my husband was still completely unconscious back on the mainland. I took in a steadying breath myself.

The medic seemed to sense my disquietude and, having wrapped up now, said to Leedom, "Ma'am, that should do it. Just take it easy for the next couple days and get some good rest. We'll try to keep the remainder of our...extraterrestrial neighbors out of your hair. And I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, Corpsman. And you too, Cooper, for getting us out."

"That was all Lloyd, ma'am. I'll extend the thanks when I see him. Take care."

I'd already started to turn to go when a sudden thought came to mind. "Wait a second. I had another question, if you don't mind."

Reynolds gave me a warning look. "Colonel. My patient needs her rest now."

"I know, I just..."

"Go ahead, Cooper," the scientist said.

I nodded and went on. "Did you happen to see which of the active portals the Prometheans came from? Or is there a chance it may have been an inactive one?"

Leedom quickly shook her head a second time, then frowned and winced when the motion seemed to bring her pain. She must've momentarily forgotten her injury. Reynolds made a move to help, but she held up her hand to stop him. "I did not, Colonel. I'm afraid I wasn't much aware of my surroundings at the time. But to answer your second question, no. There is no way they could have come from an inactive portal. Yet more than one active one is a definite possibility. Especially for a group their size."

"Right. Thank you, Doctor. That's all I wanted to know."

I walked away thinking about what she'd said, and wondering where the Prometheans were really coming from. It could've been anywhere from Sanghelios or Requiem - wherever that was. Or, like she'd said, both. I shuddered to think that the Prometheans were somehow connected to the Elites' homeworld, but I'd seen stranger shit in my lifetime. I supposed only time would tell.

\* \* \*

><p>After talking to Doctor Jill Leedom, I took another few minutes to sort out the list of casualties from the battle with Reynolds. We hadn't lost as many Marines as I'd imagined, which was a relief, but it was upsetting nonetheless to have any of the men and women under your charge be gone. I went around and spoke to several of the wounded next, but though I thought about it, I never told the medic about what had happened to me when I'd emerged from the ruins. I wasn't sure why; I guess I didn't want to worry him or divert his attention to something else when he had so many others to focus on right now. I told myself I'd talk to him about it later at some point, then moved on to the next thing now that I was feeling okay again.<p>

The next thing was making sure the rest of the scientists were free from harm after the fight. I found out from Major Brewer's XO that they were, just shaken up like Leedom had been. I figured that was the best I could hope for right now, so I went to speak to them briefly before wandering over to the command tent.

Inside, I was greeted by an oddly empty makeshift HQ - no doubt since everyone had left to join the fight - and an urgently glowing holo-table. It was scrolling endlessly with icons and announcements from the just-finished skirmish with the Prometheans. Since the blinking lights and attention-grabbing wails were making my pounding head even worse, I walked over and shut it off, then took an extended moment to marvel at the quiet. Slowly, I eased my DMR off my shoulder, set it and my helmet on the ground, then leaned my hands across the inanimate table and closed my eyes. For just that second I was aware of every tiny movement in my body, every ache in my bones, and every beat of my heart. Then I thought of Willis again, still lying in a coma in his hospital bed on the mainland, and it all came crashing down.

Given everything that had happened recently, I was pretty sure I would've broken down right then if Major Brewer hadn't walked in.

"Colonel Cooper, ma'am. Am I...interrupting something?"

I opened my eyes for the first time, feeling like I'd been away from here a lot longer than just a couple seconds. I heaved a tired sigh as I straightened up off the console. "Not at all, Major. Something you need?"

"You asked me to come find you when everything was squared away by the ruins, ma'am."

"Oh. That's right. Is it?"

"Yes, ma'am. I had one of my company commanders send in two platoons after Captain Cooper's demo team, and I have the rest of the 213th set up outside to back up Major Harris's men as well. We shouldn't have anymore problems keeping a tight lid on there."

"Good. Then I guess you'd like to know why I asked to see you." I turned to face her more fully before she could answer, folding my arms across my chest and leaning back against the table behind me. "I've always made it a habit of getting to know my officers when I'm not in the middle of fending off a major invasion force and not one, not two, but three different enemies." At that, I gave her a weak grin. "So tell me about yourself, Dani. You've been mostly on your own on the mainland since you've arrived, but now that you're here with us, I'd like to know your story. Beyond what's readily available on your CSV."

Brewer looked momentarily taken aback, like she hadn't been expecting this at all. Gradually, though, her expression eased, and she, too, crossed her arms over her chest as she glanced down at her boots. "I'm...not sure what to say, ma'am." Then she looked up sharply with her green eyes, a shade lighter than mine, and said firmly, "I like my record to speak for me."

"I'm not asking about your record, Major. I'm asking about you. I like to know the people I work with, not just the name and rank or the bullet-point career stats. What drives you as a person?"

"My daughter, Colonel," she answered without hesitation.

My eyebrows went up. "You have a daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am. Her name is Alexis, and she's eleven. She means the world to me." Again she looked down at her boots, as if wondering how much to say. "I grew up on Roost, ma'am. Rich colony, famed tourist destination. My family wasn't any different, loaded to the brim with credits just like everyone else there, even during the war." She shrugged. "I was kind of a brat as a kid, but that's the nature of the beast when nothing's off limits."

"My third year of college, I met Alexis's father, Kieran. I'm not proud of it, but long story short, we ended up going to a party together, got drunk, hooked up, and a few weeks later I told him I was pregnant. Kieran took off in classic asshole style, my parents

disowned me, and now I was left with no money and no one but myself and my unborn baby at twenty-one years old - and a whole other year of college to get through before I'd be done. For a long time those first few months I wanted to cry, but eventually I realized that that was never going to help me get through what I needed to. So I grew a pair, went to look for a part-time job, and finished out my semester. A while after that Alexis was born, and my whole world changed."

"Wow." I leaned forward off the table a bit and scratched the side of my head with one hand. "I have to admit, I wasn't expecting a story like this out of you."

She smiled faintly. "Few do, ma'am. But I'm not one to shy away from who I am, good or bad, and I don't want anyone, ever, to think I see my daughter as a mistake. I had her young, and not under the best of circumstances, but I made due with what I had and rebuilt myself from the ground up after that. It wasn't easy, but I like who I became after Alexis was born a hell of a lot more than the snobby, privileged brat I was before. Because of her, I learned how to stand on my own two feet and make my own way through life. And I like to think I made a good one for us by finishing up school a couple years later and applying to OCS."

Something about her tale had struck a chord with me - in a lot of ways, I'd had a drastic transformation from when I was young, too. I'd gone from a fragile, vulnerable girl who'd allowed an abusive relationship to continue well longer than it should have, to a much stronger, almost unrecognizable version of myself after becoming a Marine and marrying Willis. Though our circumstances had been different, I was beginning to find that Brewer and I shared many similarities in common. I leaned back again and chuckled.

"You don't know this, but I had my first son not too much older than you had your daughter. I was twenty-two, hadn't seen my husband in over two years, and after fighting on Coristal for a horrific first campaign...let's just say we had a lot of pent-up emotions to work out when we finally reunited. Nine months later I was twenty-three and had a newborn son in the middle of a colony-spanning war with no real reason to think I was ever going to see Will alive again, or that we'd even make it through as a species." I shook my head sadly and shrugged. "Yet here we are, Major. Five years post-war and it seems like here in the Outer Colonies, at least, nothing much has changed."

I felt the shift in my gut after mentioning Willis before I realized the same thing had shown up on my face. I tried quickly to cover up the deep hurt, but it was too late.

Major Brewer's expression softened. "I'm sorry about your husband, Colonel. I heard what happened to him here on Qamar during the invasion. I hope he makes a full recovery soon."

I had to swallow hard on the lump in my throat to speak. "Thanks, Dani. And thanks for telling me what you did. I'm going to try my hardest to get you back to your little girl, and to get all of us home safe."

**\*\*Chapter Thirty: More or Less Aware\*\***

\*\*\*\*\*0635\*\* Hours, March 1, 2558. \*\*\*\*\*Qamar Island  
Ruins,\*\*\*\* Planet Khan\*\*\*\*. "The Rebound," Outer  
Colonies.\*\*\*\*\* Day Eleven of the Dawn of the  
Prometheans\*\*

As much as I wanted things to be different the last several days - hoping for something good to happen for a change - nothing came along to alter the circumstances that much. If anything, things had gotten worse; not so much because of the fighting, which was still mostly at a standstill for now thanks to our complete coverage of the island, but in terms of morale. We'd managed to stall both the Storm and the Prometheans that had shown up so far, but we were all tired of constantly being on our toes waiting for trouble. Being that amped up and alert for days - weeks, now - on end was taxing for body and mind, and I longed for something to make things better again.

Unfortunately, as soon as I awoke from my cot in the command tent after yet another minuscule nap, I realized pretty quickly that today was going to be even worse. I sat up slowly at first, running a hand through my still put-up but sleep-mussed hair, let out a yawn, and planted my booted feet on the ground. I looked around sleepily for my battledress jacket since I was just in my T-shirt and pants, picked it up, then felt around in the pockets for my meds. I took my birth control pills as usual, but when I reached for the ones for the nightmares, a rattle of the bottle came up silent. There was only one pill left.

If I thought things were going to finally start going my way today after a hellish past couple of weeks, I was sadly mistaken.

"Good morning, Colonel," I heard a voice say beside me then, and I quickly shoved both pill bottles in my pants pockets and looked up. It was Major Harris. "Rough night?"

I snorted while I rubbed at my eyes. "If you can call two hours of sleep every few days a whole night's rest, sure."

Harris smiled faintly. "If we end up having four hours of uninterrupted sleep for just one day after all this is over, ma'am, I won't complain."

"Well, you might as well go looking for the Holy Grail while you're at it, too, Major." I managed a small grin of my own. "So? How're the lines looking out there right now?"

"Quiet. I almost wonder if the Storm are up to something. They haven't tried a major charge against any of our lines for a couple of days now."

"And we know that usually spells trouble. Keep a good eye on them in your sector, Shawn."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've already tasked two of Collins's squadrons to cover you guys by the ruins as well. Never know when the Prometheans might choose to

jump back into the fray again."

"Right, Colonel. We're on it." My former XO shifted uncomfortably for a moment before turning to glance at me sideways, arms folded over his chest. "Any word yet from the mainland about Hawk?"

I shook my head and tried my best to keep the anguished disappointment off my face. "No. We're on day ten now since his crash, and still nothing."

The 8th's commander leaned over to squeeze my shoulder. "I'm sure he'll make it through, ma'am. It's not hopeless yet."

"The doctor said it'd get to be a worrisome case after a week. It's been three days past that."

Harris released a sigh. "Still, can't hurt to hope, Colonel." He gathered up his gear then, ready to get back out to the island. "Let me know if you need anything."

"I will, Harris. Thanks."

Once the major was gone, I was left alone in my part of the command tent, with only a few aides checking holotables and maps here and there. I sat there another minute on my cot with my head in my hands, wondering what in the hell I was going to do without my PTSD medication out in the field, and if and when I'd ever see my husband recover. I was still wallowing in self-pity as I took my very last pill for the nightmares when another figure stepped in front of me.

I looked up slowly, suddenly feeling sapped of all my energy. "What's going on now, Staff?"

Staff Sergeant Porter straightened, standing there with his SAW by his feet and his hands clasped formally behind his back. "Ma'am, I thought you should know. Captain Heat is here to see you."

I almost let out a surprised laugh. He was easily the last person I wanted to see this morning. Or pretty much ever, really. "You know what? Go ahead and send him in, Josh. It's not like he can make anything worse with his fucking words."

My aide nodded dutifully despite my mood and left. A few minutes later, my husband's best friend and wingmate appeared in his place, looking as uneasy as I felt.

"Well, Brandon? Who've you shot down today? You keeping a tally of your friendly hits yet?"

"No, ma'am," Heat answered stiffly. He stood rigid before me, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He looked like he either hadn't slept since Willis had crashed or he had a serious guilty conscious about what happened - maybe both. Either way, I was glad about it. He deserved nothing less than the torment I'd felt every minute of the last ten days while Willis was in a coma. "Actually, I'm here for something else."

"Spill, then."

His expression changed abruptly, breaking into a wide grin despite his obvious fatigue. "He's awake, Natalie. I just heard from Major Collins, who got the message from the mainland. Willis woke up. I'm set to take you over there now."

\* \* \*

><p>I'd never gotten ready so fast in my life. I fixed my messy head of brown hair quickly, then pulled on my jacket and picked up my helmet and DMR before strapping on body armor. I didn't know how safe the mainland was anymore, but I knew for sure things were still iffy here on the island. I wasn't taking any chances getting to Heat's waiting Pelican, because it would've just been way too damn poetic for me to get shot and killed on my way to see Willis.<p>

Luckily, Staff Sergeant Porter and his squad accompanied me and the pilot to the bird as part of my security detail. We got out to the aircraft and inside with no fuss, and since it was just the two of us this time, things were quiet for an awful long time until Captain Heat finally spoke once we were airborne.

"Cooper...I wanted to say I'm sorry it's me. I got assigned to this." I heard him swallow hard. "If you don't want me near him while we're there, I understand. I can leave you guys alone."

I didn't answer at first. I wasn't really sure what to say. Again I ran a hand through my hair, trying to sort through my various emotions at all this, then let out a sigh. "I won't keep you from your friend, Heat. I'm...sorry too. I've been a bitch to you when you've always done right by us in the past, and I know that what happened was an accident." I glanced down at my boots and shook my head. "It's just, losing Will isn't on the list of things I can take. I thought he..." Like the captain I swallowed on the lump in my throat, then continued. "I thought he wouldn't make it."

"I know, Natalie. But he's going to be okay now," his buddy reassured me. "And thanks, for forgiving me."

\* \* \*

><p>When we touched down I was left feeling oddly nervous. I'd waited anxiously for over a week for news like this, and now that the time was finally here, I found myself shaking a little as I pulled off my helmet and walked. I wasn't sure what to expect, or just how improved my husband's state really was. I just knew I needed to be here - and how much I wanted to see him.<p>

As we got closer to the field hospital on the mainland, I noticed Captain Heat slow up behind me. Though I was impatient to forge ahead, I stopped and quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked.

Heat motioned in the negative. "No, ma'am. I'll come see him in a while. You guys should have some privacy." He scuffed at the red dirt with his boots. "Besides, since he just got up, they might only let you in to see him for now anyway, till he's better."

I nodded. "Okay. I'll come find you when we're done."

I was left to go the rest of the distance on my own. When I walked in in full gear and with my rifle slung diagonally behind my back, uniform worn and dirty, I looked instantly out of place and garnered quite a few stares at my presence. I ignored them and went right up to the nearest doctor to ask if I could see Willis. It was Doctor Kiev again, and this time, instead of wearing a somber expression as he'd done when I'd visited last a few days ago, he offered me a small, encouraging grin.

"Colonel Cooper. So you heard. I'll take you over to see him now, ma'am. Come this way."

Though I knew the way myself now by heart, I happily followed anyway. I was so excited I didn't really have much room to feel anything else at the moment - until we stepped inside his room.

Still lying supine in his hospital bed, my husband didn't notice us walk in right away. But it was just a second later that he opened his eyes a crack and glanced over towards the door, breaking into a pained smile.

"Natalie."

It was as much as he could seem to get out for the time being, and something about seeing him awake and hearing him say my name shattered everything in me that I'd tried so fucking hard to keep inside the past several days. I broke into tears with a weak smile of my own, and just stood in the doorway for a long time, unable to move.

Eventually, I felt a pair of hands gently grab my shoulders from behind. Doctor Kiev, urging me on. "Go ahead, ma'am. I'll come back in a few minutes to update you both on his condition."

I nodded slowly but continued standing there once the doctor had left. It was like my legs had suddenly revolted. But then Willis grinned a little at me again and I finally found the strength to walk forward.

Willis was wrapped up in bandages like before, with a number of thin tubes running through him. His more severe injuries were still visible in the form of dark bruises across his body - his chest had turned a yellowish blue color now, as had the skin around the broken fingers on his right hand. His face looked better, though; much of the color had come back so he wasn't so chalky and pale. And most importantly, his gorgeous hazel eyes were half-open and he was alert.

As soon as I reached his bedside, I leaned over and grabbed his uninjured left hand in my grasp. "Hi, honey."

"H-hey."

My grin widened at his reply, raspy though it was. I wiped some of the tears still making tracks down my face with my sleeve, then used my other hand to gently smooth back the golden brown hair from his forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"Not so...good, Coop." I startled a little when I felt his hand give mine a firm squeeze, and he smirked a bit. "But you're...here now, so



I...can't complain."

I looked down and noticed the respirator was gone. "You're breathing on your own now. That's good." I chuckled lightly to counter the lump that still constricted my throat. "Last time I came to see you, you weren't so autonomous."

"Yeah. Doc says I'm...doing much better than...when I first got here. Just took too...long of a nap."

"He's right. You nearly gave me another heart attack."

"I'm...sorry."

I leaned in closer then and touched my lips to his with care, closing my eyes as I took in his familiar scent. I'd missed it. I'd missed him. "Don't be. I love you, Will. Very much."

"I...love you, too, Cooper."

There was so much more I wanted to say to him - that we needed to say to each other. About the crash, and about the despair I'd felt for days when I thought I was losing him. But it'd all have to wait until later, because just then, Doctor Kiev came back into the room. He was wearing a smile. I straightened up as he walked over, but I never let go of Willis's hand.

"So, Doc," my husband said, his voice coming out rough. "What'd I...miss?"

"A lot I'm afraid, Major," Kiev replied. "But no worries. We'll get you up to speed soon enough. Just try to take it easy for a while. You were in pretty bad shape when you got here, so recovery will take some time."

"I thought you...said I was better."

"You are, but better than death's doorstep isn't very functional out in the real world, son. It'll be a while till you're combat ready."

Willis glanced up at me then, still unable to fully open his eyes just yet. "Natalie? What about...my pilots? Kilo and...Victor and...Cobra?"

"All taken care of, honey," I answered. "Collins is planetside now, leading the air wing. We had...plenty of shit going on to tackle after you took your dive."

"Right, so...what's wrong with me? How soon can I...go back and...fly?"

My face fell as Doctor Kiev and I exchanged a glance. I remembered Reynolds's words to me when Willis had first crashed hard onto Qamar, and I knew this was going to be difficult for my husband to hear. I squeezed his hand in preparation.

"Hawk, I'm not sure you appreciate the gravity of your injuries," Kiev said carefully then. "You're very lucky to be alive, and that

you've safely emerged from a coma after so many days. With your severe concussion, contusions, and broken bones, it'll be some time before you're up and running."

Willis mulled it over for a minute, as best he could in his condition. "So a...few weeks, maybe?"

Kiev released a lengthy sigh. Then he ran a hand over his hair and said, "I won't lie to you, Major. Right now, your return to flight status is...uncertain at best."

"You mean...forever?" My husband's ragged voice went even lower and harsher, and the raw hurt in his tone crushed me. "I might not...fly again?"

I remained by his side and stroked his hand with my thumb. "Will, we don't know anything yet. We're just happy you're still here for right now."

"The colonel's right, son. You just focus on healing up and getting your strength back for now. The rest we'll deal with as it comes."

## 32. Chapter 31: Time Waits for No One

### \*\*Chapter Thirty-One: Time Waits for No One\*\*

Doctor Kiev left us shortly after dropping the bombshell on my husband, leaving the two of us alone again in the room. I looked over at Willis to make sure he was okay, but for a long time, he didn't speak.

Taking a seat now in the small plastic chair beside the bed, I took his hand in both of mine and squeezed again. "Will - "

"Do you...know what this...means for me?" he asked with great effort before I could finish. Then he turned his gaze away from me for a moment to stare up at the ceiling. "Fuck, Natalie."

"Of course I know," I replied softly. "Why do you think I was so worried when I found out? But listen, I'm not so upset about it anymore."

"W-what? Why?"

"Because you're alive, Will. You woke up and survived this. So if you're keeping track, that means you've already proven them wrong once." I gave him a faint smile. "Prove 'em wrong again."

"I'm not...sure I...can."

"Maybe not now, but you will with time." I snorted. "Just look at what happened to me a couple months ago, or even Hayden during the war when he got shot in the damn head. You think either of us were supposed to come back from that? But that's not the point. The important thing is that we did."

That garnered me a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Coop...I'm not...like you. I can't just...take everything...like a tank

and...bounce back."

Grinning, I leaned down and kissed him gently. "Sure you can. You're tougher than you think. And I'm a lot less tough than you think. You should've seen me the past week and a half while you've been out. I was moping around and beside myself since you crashed."

"Because you...love me."

"Yep." I touched my forehead to his. "I've been in love with you for fourteen years now, Mister. I'm not stopping anytime soon. So please, don't give up on yourself just yet."

"I'll...try."

I leaned back in my chair and stroked his hair reassuringly. "That's all it takes."

It was strange - in the past, Willis had always been the one to keep me going in dire straights, to tell me things were going to be okay. He'd always been the optimist. Being the calm, levelheaded one now was...different and new, to say the least. But as I looked down at him, I realized I felt truly serene for the first time in ages. And this despite the fact that I knew we both still had a hard road ahead - Willis with his recovery, me with the situation over on Qamar. But for right now, none of it mattered.

Because I had my husband back.

\* \* \*

><p>I didn't want to leave Willis's bedside for any reason, but regardless of what I would have liked, I knew I still had my duties to perform. That became abundantly and immediately clear to me when my datapad buzzed as I sat there next to him, watching him sleep once more thanks to his meds.<p>

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," I said. "Who is this?"

It was a slightly amused, deep voice that answered back. "Colonel, this is Captain Rhodes. Go outside and look up."

A grin started to spread across my face as I rose from the chair in silence so that I didn't wake my husband. After that, I carefully picked up my helmet and DMR from the floor close by. I didn't speak until I was out of the room.

"I think I have an idea of what I might find, sir," I finally responded. "How'd you know I'd be indoors?"

"Word travels fast, Colonel. I heard Major Hawk just regained consciousness this morning, so I knew that barring the arrival of a second enemy invasion force, that's where you'd be. I trust he's doing well?"

"Well as can be expected after what he went through, sir. I'm just very glad he's awake."

"As am I. I'm sure handling the invasion was tough on you even without the distraction. But you can tell me all about that once

you're aboard."

I suddenly stopped in my tracks in the hallway. "Sir?"

"You've got another pilot down there, yes?"

"Affirmative, Captain."

Captain Rhodes released a sigh on the other end. "Then I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut your reunion short, Cooper. I'm sorry to do it, but we need you up on the Ex ASAP. There's quite a lot to discuss."

I swallowed, trying not to sound too disappointed. "I understand, sir."

"Good. I'll want you up here in thirty minutes. Rhodes out."

\* \* \*

><p>Though I'd hated taking off without saying goodbye to Willis, I hadn't wanted to wake him, either - ironically, more sleep was what would help him heal faster. I figured he'd probably had enough already with all the days he'd spent in a coma, but Doctor Kiev had assured me earlier that rest was still the order of the day. So, ruefully, I boarded Heat's Pelican again and sat impatiently inside the troop bay as he flew us up.<p>

I'd always been nervous in ships or aircraft of any kind, but this morning I had to admit that I barely even noticed. There was too much going on in my head at the moment for me to focus on the fact that I was in the air, a veritable fish in a barrel just waiting for the Storm ship that was still somewhere out here to blow us out of existence with the remainder of its Seraphs on board. But it didn't, and we soon touched down again inside the Excalibur's starboard hangar bay.

I piled out quickly as soon as we'd arrived. It wasn't long before I heard the sound of boots hitting the deck repeatedly behind me - Captain Heat jogging to catch up.

"Hey," he called out to me. "What's going on?"

I shrugged my shoulders, still laden with gear. "Damned if I know. All I know is that it sounded important - and it better be since I had to leave Will's side for it. Stay here with the bird."

"Yes, ma'am."

I could tell from his tone that he was none too happy to be left out, but that wasn't my concern at the moment. I walked through the Ex's bay until I reached one of the exit hatches, ducked through, then awkwardly found myself returning salutes down most of the corridor. I hadn't had to do that in weeks.

Just as I was beginning to find myself at a loss as to where I was supposed to go next, a rushed ensign came bounding over - a different aide than last time, I noted. This junior Naval officer was male, sporting short red hair that reminded me a little of Dean's.

"Colonel Cooper, ma'am! I apologize for being late. Captain Rhodes is expecting you, ma'am. Right this way."

Slightly amused, I followed the redheaded kid down the passageway and into what looked to be a large conference room of sorts - large for shipboard accommodations, anyway. I was surprised when I saw who was also inside - Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd and Major Dani Brewer.

Uh-oh was the first thought that came to mind. I thought Rhodes had found out about them and that I was in for a reprimand for not reporting it, but then I realized we had at least a couple dozen more pressing issues to deal with down on the surface. Something else was up.

I got salutes from both the spook and the 213th's commander as I walked in. Rhodes waved mine off and simply said, "Welcome, Colonel."

"Sir."

He heaved a sigh. "Now that you're all here, we have a number of things to deal with today." He smiled slightly, but it didn't last long. "For one, we're back, obviously. I realize the Ex's absence hurt quite a bit during the initial phase of the invasion, but I hope you can see why fleeing the scene was necessary. Not only to ensure us some kind of ride home once this is all over, but to make sure we had the supplies and armaments still intact and available for a time like this, when I'm sure you're in dire need of them."

I wanted to mention that we'd actually managed pretty well with the accord I'd come to with Laraza a couple weeks ago, but the truth was that we were beginning to run low on even those additional supplies now. And I wasn't about to go back and make a drunken idiot of myself on the mainland again to get more. One embarrassing evening was enough for me.

Meanwhile, the captain continued.

"I also wanted you all to know that I regret not being aboard the Affair when it went down. It should've been my duty but I was here at the time, meeting with the CO of the Ex, and it was just one of those damn awful coincidences. It's good for the mission that I survived, however, because now we can get things organized from the top again." He looked at me then. "Only way to do that is to know what exactly the situation on the ground has been since we left. Cooper, I yield the floor to you. Let's hear what you've got."

"Yes, sir." I nodded and folded my arms across my chest. "Things've been a little hectic since the Excalibur jumped. We had a pretty bad mess on our hands at first, with the Storm dropping in in force and not nearly as much backup as we should've had to counter everything that was thrown at us. The Marines fought well though, sir - both in the air and on the ground. Never gave up.

"We managed to get air superiority shortly after my husband was shot down; Collins led the team upstairs with Broadwords, and they were able to send what was left of the Seraphs up there packing. That freed them up to help us out more on the ground, and that, in turn, gave us a considerable advantage. We were able to gain the upper hand

from there, but as you just mentioned, we were burning through ordnance and fuel for our wings pretty quick."

I paused and ran a hand through my hair, remembering what had happened only a week or two ago, but somehow, it already felt like eons had passed. "I knew that unless we wanted to get overrun by Storm troops again, we needed to get those supplies. So I went over to the mainland to talk to Mayor Laraza, and he agreed to help us out."

Rhodes quirked a small smirk. "That easy, huh?"

I smiled a little, too. "It took some persuasion, but we made it happen. After that things were going very well until the Prometheans showed up inside the ruins. We had the scientists down there already poking around, and the skirmish was rough. We were overwhelmed underground and had to take the fight topside. We also lost one of the brains, sir."

"That's regrettable. And now?"

I released a sigh. "And now, things've thankfully been stable for a while. We let the scientists recoup for a few days while we ensured the security of the area down below, and made further arrangements to make sure it was safe."

"How so?"

"I beefed up the guard, and had Captain Cooper's demo team rig the place as a last resort, sir. It was our only option left."

The senior Naval officer nodded. "I agree, Colonel. Continue."

"Now the scientists are back at it, and we're waiting to hear what else they may have found in there, if anything. In the meantime, my battalions on the ground have been helping to protect them, in addition to keeping the Storm in check and being available to curb anymore threats the Prometheans might pose."

The captain took a while to let it all sink in. Eventually, he glanced up at me again. "Very thorough assessment, Colonel. And great instincts. It sounds like you handled everything that was thrown at you well, just like I knew you would."

"Thank you, sir."

"Which brings me to my next point. Now that we're back in business, I was able to speak with Rear Admiral Dartmouth back on Earth. In recognition of your command, we're switching up your battalions' structure a little bit."

"Sir?"

"We decided to formally pull the 8th Engineer Battalion, the 904th Infantry Battalion, and the 213th Infantry Battalion together." He pulled out a unit patch from his breast pocket and handed it over to me face-up. "Colonel Cooper, consider yourself CO of the newly minted 52nd Regiment."

I was just about as blown away as when I'd been made a lieutenant

colonel almost a month ago. Though I'd already been leading a regiment-sized unit since, formal recognition was unprecedented...and spectacular. "Wow, sir. Thank you. I don't know what else to say."

"How about 'Where the hell is my XO?'" he said with a grin. "That'd be my first question, as you're definitely going to need one."

I chuckled, too. "Yes, sir. That would help."

Much to my surprise, he turned over to the major in the room. "Brewer, I'd like you to do the honors. You're the senior battalion commander on the ground, and I can't think of anyone better suited to the job."

She looked just as taken aback as I'd been. She recovered quickly though and replied, "Thank you, sir."

Rhodes handed her the new patch as well, then returned to leaning back against the table behind him. "Well. Now that that's all worked out, Major Brewer, congratulations. You're dismissed."

"Sir!" Brewer gave a crisp salute, did an about face, and left the room. That meant it was only me, the spook, and Rhodes inside now. If Lloyd was happy for her, which I'm sure he was, not a bit of it showed in his expression. He was ONI all right.

My attention was diverted again when the captain spoke.

"There's a few more items I'd like to discuss with the two of you in private," he said. "Firstly, do either of you know where the Prometheans emerged from when they attacked?"

"No, sir," Caleb answered. "Sorry."

"Sir, I spoke with one of the scientists after the fight," I amended. "While we were down there surveying the progress, she'd told me they'd found five portals in the chamber - three inactive, two live. The two live portals are connected to Sanghelios and a place called Requiem, respectively." I glanced down at my boots, contemplating. "Beyond that, I don't know much about the mechanics, but she said it was possible they could have come out of one or even both. We were attacked en masse and it took Brewer's Marines and a Mantis to keep them at bay. So my bets, personally, are on them coming from two portals." This time I shrugged. "Then again, I don't know how or why they'd be tied to the Elites' homeworld, and I don't know anything about this Requiem yet, Captain."

Rhodes nodded, taking the information in stride - like not much of this was news to him. It made me curious, but I waited patiently for his reply.

"Well, that's another reason I brought the two of you up here this morning," he finally answered. Then he turned to the spook. "Lieutenant, go ahead and brief the colonel on Requiem."

### 33. Chapter 32: Things to Consider

Author's Note: Short chapter this time, guys. I'm getting married

this weekend so I've been crazy busy trying to get all that together, and I'll probably be MIA for a bit, but I just wanted to post this up before I take off. Hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Thirty-Two: Things to Consider<span>\*\*

Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd gave a slight bow of his head to Captain Rhodes and said, "Yes, sir." Then he turned to me. "Ma'am, I want you to understand that not even our knowledge of Requiem is complete right now. We're trying to get as much as we can from our forces out there - "

I let out a snort and leaned back against the bulkhead. "I guess that tells me something already. We've got troops there."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Does that mean it's a planet?"

The spook scratched at the side of his head. "In a manner of speaking. The whole story is a little more complicated than that."

"Well, I'm all ears, Cal. Can't be anything weirder or worse than the Flood."

"I...think you'd be surprised, Colonel."

\_I wish. Not much surprises me anymore,\_ I thought wearily. \_Not after the war.\_ And definitely not after all that had already happened here on Khan. But I didn't say anything and let him continue.

Lloyd released a sigh, eyeing Rhodes for a moment before diving in. "You know I've read your complete service file before, ma'am. Everything in it, personal to professional. Even the redacted parts."

"I figured as much, Lloyd. You're ONI."

"Yes, ma'am. So...I guess knowing that, you'll probably find this stuff a little easier to swallow since it sounds like you've been in its presence a few times in the past. You just didn't know it then."

I quirked an eyebrow at him. "In the presence of what, exactly?"

"Forerunner tech." He glanced up at the ceiling in thought. "Or, I should say architecture, too."

"What - ?" I started to ask, but Caleb beat me to it.

"Did you ever wonder why the Covenant were attacking the planets they did during the war, Colonel? Granted, a few really were just along their path of destruction, as you found out in your early campaigns on Lacino and Heath. But what about Coristal, and Sigma Octanus Four,



and Earth? Did you ever feel that there was something different about those? Like they had a bigger purpose in being there than just wanting to annihilate us?"

I shrugged, struggling with my memory of the events and what that could possibly have to do with what we were talking about now. And I wasn't struggling because I'd forgotten. I was struggling because I'd gone through some pretty horrific things in those years that I sincerely wished I could forget. But I never had, and it was just too hard to go through the pain of reliving it all again.

Something my meds were supposed to help with, but as of this morning I'd run out.

"Ma'am?" Lieutenant Lloyd prompted.

"Yeah. Coristal, Lacino, the Reatan Desert on Heath - and the forest before that - and Cote D'Azur. And Earth." I swallowed. "I remember them, but I'm not sure - "

Then a thought popped into my mind from the depths. The battle we'd fought in Cote D'Azur six years ago - forty days of harrowing combat against the Covenant in the city, where we'd lost both our company commander and XO, and where I'd taken over for Bravo Company for the first time. At the end of it, I remembered wondering why the Covenant had spared the city and glassed much of the rest. I remembered thinking there was likely something they wanted there. I just hadn't known what - and I was too exhausted, hungry, dirty, hurting, and surprised and grateful to be alive by the end of it that I hadn't really cared. But I thought of it now.

"On Sigma Octanus Four, in the city...there was something the Covenant were after. A reason why they spared the place even after destroying a good chunk of the rest of the planet. Kind of like here. I can only think it had something to do with an object or place of religious significance to them."

Both Captain Rhodes and Lloyd smiled slightly.

"You're on the right track, Cooper," Rhodes said. "The Covenant were after something in the city. Sounds like you had good instincts even then."

"So...something there was linked to here on Khan? Linked to the portals, maybe?"

"Sort of," Lloyd answered. "Both were artifacts left behind by the Forerunners. That's who the Covenant - and now the Storm - have been worshipping all these years."

"You mean...that's who built the portals? And the ruins?"

"And tried their damndest to save the rest of us from the Flood way back when. Yeah."

At that I snorted again. "Well, they did a pretty shitty job at that."

"No argument there. So you remember Cote D'Azur then, and thinking there had to be something more the Covies were after there."

"Right. You're saying they were after this Forerunner stuff. That's why the city was spared, and why they fought so hard to take it back."

"Correct, ma'am. Now, what do you remember about Coristal?"

"Everything," I answered without hesitation. "It was my first campaign. I was twenty years old and a second lieutenant in charge of my first platoon, green as grass. Why?"

Caleb nodded. "You found something in the swamps there. Walked right past it, but in your after-action report, you noted that your CO didn't let you go near it to see."

I didn't have to think long on that to recall the memory of that very patrol, over ten years ago now. It was all still very fresh in my mind - too fresh. "They were ruins, hidden under the water in some parts and overgrown with vines in others. But I still made them out from afar, and pointed them out to the captain. I thought they might be important to our mission."

"More than you knew, Cooper," Captain Rhodes said quietly. "It's one of the main reasons the Covenant invaded there in 2548."

"No kidding," I breathed. I'd been right. "So that's it for Coristal and Sigma Octanus Four. What about Earth?"

"Earth's the tricky one. Remember your trip to New Mombasa and Voi? Do you remember that your unit got evacuated just before the Elites were set to glass the place?"

I took a deep breath. "I sure do. Those last few hours on the ground were the closest I ever came to shitting my pants. I thought we were all cooked for sure before that Longsword swooped in. What was going on?"

Rhodes took over the conversation now, finally stepping closer to us. "There was a Forerunner portal in Africa, Colonel. That's what you and your Marines were really fighting to protect - to keep the Covenant from getting to it and essentially blowing up the whole damn universe. It was called the Ark."

\* \* \*

><p>Captain Rhodes and the spook took the next twenty minutes explaining the rest of the story to me, and putting almost everything I'd ever done as a UNSC Marine into true context. By the time they were done I felt like I was in mental overload; now, finally, up to a decade later, I was being told things I hadn't been privy to before at my lower ranks that really put things in perspective. I understood a lot of the decisions made by my superiors more, and got a deeper insight into things I'd experienced for myself and had been present for, but had never really known the larger truth about. Now I did.<p>

It was a lot to take in, but unfortunately for me, there was still much more to come.

"So these Forerunners...they left all this behind to help keep us safe from the Flood. But the failsafes all just boiled down to...'kill everyone'?"

"More or less, but the Ark was the exception. Or it was supposed to be, if used properly. But that part's just a little background for your final mission of the War in Africa. Now that you're familiar with all this, we get to tell you the fun part."

I raised an eyebrow at the two of them. "There's probably no fun part, is there?"

"Sure is," Lloyd answered somberly. "Turning much of the cosmos into a string of giant bombs wasn't the Forerunners' only failsafe against the parasite. They'd...also started converting the food sources to something inedible before they stopped."

"I'm guessing they were the food sources? Along with us humans?" I shook my head, feeling like I was treading water here but also knowing there was no way to get off this damn head-spinning ride until it finished. "What'd they try to turn us into?"

The spook didn't answer me this time, instead looking over at Rhodes. It was the captain who finally heaved a sigh and said the words.

"Prometheans, Colonel. They're Forerunner AIs. And the Forerunner didn't just try. They succeeded."

\* \* \*

><p>It took me a while to let that sink in. In fact, I still didn't think I fully grasped it even by the time the conversation resumed.<p>

I wasn't really thinking about being the one to speak first. It just happened.

"So uh, what does this have to do with what's going on on Requiem?"

"Requiem is one of the Forerunners' shield worlds, Colonel," Lloyd responded. "And currently, we have a large ship and forces deployed down there, also fighting the Remnant and Prometheans. It's where we first encountered the latter, and it's where we're getting the majority of our intel about them for now."

Several things clicked into place at once in my mind. "You think that's where they've been coming from, then. We've got a link down in the ruins to that planet."

"Yes," Captain Rhodes confirmed.

Even though I'd learned probably more than I'd ever wanted to know today, I felt that there was something else going on in this mysterious new world that neither were telling me. I could see it in their eyes, their expressions, and even in their stances. Hell, it was almost a presence in the damn room. But seeing as my mind was already going in a hundred different directions at once, I was cautious of wanting to be introduced to more at this point. I let it

go for now and was just thankful the briefing was nearly complete.

After an extended moment, I heaved a long sigh. "So what now, sir?"

"Now we do what we've been doing all along, Colonel - keep a tight lid on the situation. We don't want things to get out of hand to the point where the two battles get intertwined via the portals. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that's also why rigging the chamber down there was exactly the right thing to do. If ever the fight seems like it could be headed that way, that we've got more incoming from Requiem than we can handle here...you don't hesitate. You press that button and you send the bastards to kingdom come."

#### 34. Chapter 33: Chew on That

Author's Note: Apologies for another short chapter, and not being able to do individual replies to reviews this time. Apparently there's a lot to do even after the nuptials (paperwork and the like), so things are still in hectic post-wedding mode. I very much appreciate all the well-wishes, though, so thanks and I hope you enjoy!\*\*  
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><p><strong><span>Chapter Thirty-Three: Chew on That<span>\*\*

Following the briefing I stood in one of the few long, wide corridors aboard the Excalibur, boots planted firmly apart with my arms crossed over my chest. I didn't say anything and wasn't trying to think too much at the moment; all I did was stare out at the vast expanse of stars just beyond the rare wall-to-wall viewport. Normally that would've put the fear of God in me, especially considering that the invading Storm ship was still out here with us. But for now, though the view was making me uneasy thanks to the knowledge of being on a ship, somehow it didn't seem to outweigh the importance of everything I'd just learned about my past, and present.

Eventually I couldn't keep the swirling thoughts at bay in my mind anymore. I just let my brain go where it needed to, all at once - the implications of what I'd discovered; past actions and events that suddenly made a lot more sense; what things like these Prometheans, Forerunner, and the resurgence of the Remnant might mean for Khan - and maybe for Earth. I thought of my now-regiment of Marines on the surface, of Willis slowly recuperating on the mainland, and of our three kids back home on Mars. Suddenly this wasn't just about the original mission anymore. It wasn't about the rebels, or Khan, or even the Outer Colonies. All in a rush I realized that we could very well go to another full-scale war again.

The thought gripped me so hard I felt my heart clench. I wasn't sure I could go through anything like that again - something contained

that threatened a colony or two, sure. But something that threatened our entire species? \_A second time?\_ That, I didn't know.

Things were already getting dicey here even without the new revelations. And me not having my meds was only going to make it all worse.

"Colonel? Are you all right?"

The question broke into my musings, but I wasn't startled. I guess after my expanded history lesson, it was going to take much more than that to get a reaction out of me. I turned and faced Lieutenant Lloyd with a shrug.

"I don't know, Cal, to be honest," I said. Then I let out a small chuckle. "How are you supposed to feel after learning some pretty earth-shattering shit in one go?"

His lips quirked into a sad smile. "You're supposed to feel like me, ma'am. Every single day."

"You're right. You're used to getting this kind of stuff dumped on you all the time, huh?"

It was a rhetorical question, and Lloyd didn't answer. I released a sigh.

"One of the things I've hated the most about my promotions after the war is that every step up, there's a whole new mental playing field to negotiate. It started off with being aware of the political situation here on Khan, then bumped up to attempting cordial relations with the locals - and with Laraza - and now it's moved on to being told a whole bunch of super secret backstory to the entire damn war we just fought." I pinched the bridge of my nose between my fingers. "What the fuck else is there that I missed, Cal? What more am I going to be briefed on that I honestly can say I wish I didn't know?"

The ghost of a smile remained on the spook's face. "You've always been a field officer at heart, Colonel. Through and through. I knew that when I read your file, even before I'd actually met you and discovered it for myself. You never wanted to be involved in the how or why, just the 'what': What can we do to stop it, what concrete intel do we have that could help, what do I lead my men into next, what will get my Marines home safe and complete the mission?" He glanced down at his boots. "In terms of tactical deployment and offense, ma'am, you're second to none. Dealing with the bigger picture, however...that's something you're going to have to get comfortable with real quick now that you're swimming in the deep end."

"I know. I guess it just...takes time."

"That's one of the downsides of going through the ranks so fast. There's no time to digest." He looked up from the deck then and met my gaze. "But you make up for a lot of what you lack in terms of time in the higher paygrades, ma'am. Soon you'll get this, too."

"I hope so. Doesn't look like the universe is giving me much of a choice."

"Just remember something for me."

"What?"

"Everything you learned just now doesn't leave that room. You can't tell your subordinates or anyone else except the three of us. Not even Major Hawk, or Dani, now that she's your XO."

At that I grinned a little for real this time. "Dani, huh? It's getting serious."

"That's not - that wasn't the main takeaway from what I've been saying."

I slapped Caleb on the back, feeling exceedingly amused by his flustered expression. "I may have a lot to learn about dealing with the expanded parts of my responsibilities, Lieutenant, but you have a lot to learn about women."

\* \* \*

><p>I left the spook's company shortly after that to take care of a very pressing personal problem - the fact that I'd run out of meds. I had one last ditch attempt up my sleeve - going to see the doctor aboard the <em>Ex<em> - before I knew I was totally well and truly screwed. I went through several more corridors, an elevator, and down two decks before reaching the medical bay. The doctor on duty was Doctor Siara Pierce, and she approached me as soon as I walked in.

"Lieutenant Colonel, what can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you might have a drug in stock for me, Doc," I replied. "It's called InnuREM."

She pulled out her datapad and began pressing her finger against the holographic icons. "Hmm. InnuREM. Let's see..."

My heart sank when I watched the doctor shake her head.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't see the serial number on file here. If it's not on the manifest, it's definitely not aboard ship."

"Okay," I said, feeling more apprehensive of what was to come than disappointed. "Thanks for checking."

"No problem, ma'am."

I was shaking slightly by the time I stepped back out. It wasn't noticeable, but I could feel it - feel that my nerves were on edge. I'd spent the better part of a year suffering my PTSD symptoms in silence during the tail end of the war; only Willis had known about it back then. He was still among just a handful now that knew I took pills for the nightmares. But now, I feared it was going to start becoming obvious to anyone who was near me when it came time to sleep. I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to control the waking up screaming, the shaking, the crying. And though I also knew that it was only going to be gradual at first, eventually, it'd become something debilitating in the field.

One way or another, this mission on Khan had to be wrapped up soon.

\* \* \*

><p>I'd managed to calm down considerably after a brief stop by the <em>Excalibur</em>'s senior officers' wardroom. A few fingers of scotch down the hatch and I felt good to go again, despite all that I'd learned today - and the fact that the one thing that kept my nightmares in line and allowed me to be functional in combat had just run out. I met back up with Captain Heat in the hangar bay, and he shuttled us down to the surface once more.

For a minute during the flight, I thought of telling my husband - not about what I knew now since I couldn't, but about the meds and how worried I was without them. He'd understand, and he'd never been anything if not great at being able to put my mind at ease with things like that. Truth was though, he'd only just woken up from his coma and I wanted him to focus on getting better, not worrying for me and for himself since there was a good chance he'd never be at the helm of an aircraft again.

Finally I sighed to myself and ran a hand through my hair, thinking of how fucked up everything had suddenly become.

But I decided to do what I'd always done during my almost eleven-year career in the Corps - I kept my mouth shut and sucked it up.

### 35. Chapter 34: Sharing Spaces

**\*\*Chapter Thirty-Four: Sharing Spaces\*\***

\*\*\*\*1412 Hours, March 5, 2558. UNSC Staging Camp, Near the City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Hard Line," Outer Colonies. Day Fifteen of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*\*\*

I thought it'd be the smell that did me in first. In the thick, humid swamp that reeked of stale water and moldy plant parts, I was sure on the first day I'd laid my feet on the mucky, uneven soil that I was going to christen my new black combat boots with puke. I'd never been pregnant before but I figured that this was what it must feel like, to have your insides constantly swirling and your olfactory senses hideously assaulted, with every breath I took in and out. It was only when the Covenant force hit us without warning that I realized there were things much worse I could smell.

Like cauterized flesh when the Marine beside me, Corporal Ziad Hernandez, was struck with an overcharged plasma shot from somewhere between the vines. The large, glowing green orb got him right at the hip between armor plates, his clothing and belt offering little protection against something as hard-hitting as that. He let out a piercing scream in what felt like was the inside of my eardrums, and I whipped around fast, panic written all over my face and thrumming through me as a jolt of emotion, too. It was the stench that hit me before I got a good look at what had happened. Then I wanted to cry out myself.

But I couldn't. Green or no, regardless of whether I was mostly

younger or the same age as the Marines in the platoon I led, I was in charge of these men and women. Any reaction I wanted to have I couldn't, at least not on the outside, so I just kept the fear and the revulsion and the queasiness to myself and said nothing.

That's when our company's captain, Josia Kefentse, ran up beside me. He was a burly South African from Earth with dark hair and dark eyes who'd been a famed rugby player before the War. He had his submachine gun in one hand and easily grabbed my uniform collar with the other, half-yanking me back.

"Lieutenant, what are you doing?"

"Sir, I - "

"You need to get these men moving! \_Now,\_ Cooper! Unless you want to join the corporal on the ground!"

I glanced to my left and the nausea increased. Lying there in the brown-gray muck was Hernandez, already dead from his wounds. I swallowed and tried not to inhale. "Yes, sir!"

I rushed to get to my duties as platoon leader, even though by now I could hardly stand since my legs were shaking so bad. This was my first real-life encounter with anything ever - I'd trained, I'd watched the vids, I'd been in the simulators, but this was the big time. And so far, my batting average wasn't that great.

Gradually, though, I got a hold of my nerves gone wild and started to make a little sense out of the chaos around us. I focused on the lack of rhythm to the events, and I finally raised my rifle and fired off my first shot.

A high-pitched squeal came from the twisted flora in front of us. Not bad.

Growing confident from the kill and settling into a state of deep concentration, I turned back to the rest of my platoon and shouted, "Fire back, Marines! Fire back! Watch for movement between the vines! Watch for ripples in the water! You'll see those alien bastards coming and you \_nail\_ 'em!"

Slowly we put up a blanket of lead between us and the enemy - just the Covenant, as I knew them back then. I was hardly even aware of their names as each separate species. All I knew was that they were aliens who wanted to kill us, who'd killed my dad and Willis's baby brother, and so I wanted them dead, too.

Things didn't end up working out that way, though. The more we pushed forward, the more the Covies pushed back. It didn't take longer than five minutes for our lines to finally mix, and that's when things really got crazy.

On my right, as I was still firing my rifle at the Covenant up ahead, one of the Marines in my platoon jumped up and tackled a tall and fully armored Elite. I never found out why he'd done it - likely he'd run out of ammo at an inopportune moment - but either way the force of the hit sent them both tumbling into the nearest patch of shallow, vegetation-filled water. The still body of liquid was a muddy, sickly green, but the Marine dove in like it was nothing and took the alien



son of a bitch with him. As soon as I realized one of my men was in trouble, I stopped shooting and ran over to help.

By then the pair was struggling in the water, the Elite roaring in surprise and the Marine sergeant trying to get his head above the surface since the bottom gave way so easily under his boots, making it hard to stand. While he fought to keep control, I leveled my weapon at the Elite, wanting more than anything to rattle off a quick burst and save my subordinate, but the bastard was too close. With the amount of adrenaline pumping through me, I was afraid if I let off a bullet that it might hit the sergeant rather than the intended target.

So I froze and watched, feeling utterly helpless. I watched as the Elite gripped the Marine by the throat and submerged his head under the six feet of water, crushing his trachea at the same time as it drowned him. I could feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes but I couldn't seem to do anything, be it move, yell, or cry at what I was seeing. I just stood there, transfixed, knowing that the moment the Elite was done with him, he'd come gunning for me. That I was already dead.

Then a crack rang out through the swamp, and the Elite very suddenly fell face-first into the water with a loud, hard smack. My anxiously overloaded mind took a while to recognize it as a sniper shot - one of ours. I realized I was saved for now.

But one of my men wasn't. The thought barged into my head in the same instant, and I shouldered my gun, quickly stepping closer to the edge of the water and thrusting my hands inside to try to grab his body before it was too late.

Miraculously, I felt something brush against my fingers right away, and I pulled him up bodily from there, grunting and sweating and running off the energy I'd gotten from sheer terror alone to get his upper body onto dry land. Or drier, anyway. Once I saw him, however, I sucked in a harsh breath.

The Marine who'd had his neck flattened had watery blood still pouring out of his nose and mouth. His throat looked so mangled it was hard to remember what it might've looked like before - how a normal person's neck would be - and worse than the smell that came from the swamp and his body and the dead Elite was the fact that his eyes were still open. They stared up at me, vacantly, silently shouting at me that I hadn't saved him. That I'd done nothing to save him.

And in the next moment, I found myself screaming back.

\* \* \*

><p>I awoke from the terrifying dream with all my senses on high alert. I inhaled sharply, nearly jumping in my seat, and felt my heart pounding hard inside my chest. And I could feel cold steel in the fingers of my right hand. It was resting on my hip holster.<p>

A full state of consciousness came on abruptly, and I was left sitting at my husband's bedside, ten years later, on mainland Khan in the Outer Colonies - not in the dingy swampland of Coristal. My pulse still thundered through my veins. I eased off the grip on my sidearm

then, willing my body to relax, but it wasn't enough to keep from waking Willis, too.

He yawned from his bed and glanced over at me sleepily, taking in the disquietude in my expression. "Cooper? You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I replied, doing my best to cover up what I'd just experienced. Or rather remembered. I gently pulled my hand from his grip and smoothed it over my face. "Must've just drifted off after you did. By the way, you didn't...hear anything just now, did you?"

"No. Why?"

I waved the same hand at him. "No reason. Thought I heard something."

So I wasn't at the point where I was doing the screaming out loud yet. That was good. I checked my cheeks, too. They felt dry. So far, it seemed it was just the nightmare part that was active - along with waking up to feeling like I was about to have a second heart attack. It was bad, but it could've been a lot worse.

True to his nature, Willis gave me a more probing look as he grew more alert and raised an eyebrow at me. "Natalie? You're sure you feel okay?"

"I said yes, honey. Please don't worry about me." I sat up a little straighter in the chair, for good measure. At least my heart rate was finally returning to normal now. "How about you? How goes it with the pain?"

My husband winced and responded, "It's bearable. But I don't think I'll be...standing on my own two feet anytime soon." He glanced up at the ceiling, letting out a frustrated sigh. "It's been almost a week, Coop. I still haven't improved that much."

I leaned over to place my hand on his cheek and gave him a soft kiss, smiling a bit at his impatience. "More like it's been four days, Will. I know it seems like longer when you don't have much going on, but it really hasn't been a lot of time yet."

"But I...should be out of this damn bed by now."

I patted his arm in reassurance. "You know the doctor said it would be a while before you were mobile again. Hell, you're awake and talking without a great big effort anymore. That's more than I could've hoped for a few days back."

"Cooper - "

Whatever Willis was about to say was interrupted when he made a heaving motion, and I knew he was about to throw up. I quickly reached over beside me to grab the clean bucket the orderlies had left behind, shoved it under his chin, and let him spew. He'd done that for me a couple of times when I'd been pregnant with the baby we'd lost, so it was only fair I returned the favor now.

When he was done, I got up to go set the bucket in the far corner and squeezed the buzzer on the bed for a hospital tech. I sat back down

on the chair and reached over to rub his back. His head hung low over the side of the bar on his bed, his golden brown hair a little matted with sweat from the injuries.

"I'm sorry you feel so bad, honey," I said to him. "But you know what Kiev said about the concussion - "

Willis gave a snort. "Fuck the concussion. And Doctor Kiev. And this damn bed, this hospital, my bird, all of it. I just want to get back to flying, Natalie. I hate this."

"Well, we all do, but sometimes a little rest can - "

"Can what? Fix everything? Fix this?" With effort he raised his head then to look at me. "Is that what you were about to say to me? Because I bet if the roles were reversed, and it was you lying here unable to do anything and with your career on the line, you'd bite my head off too if I said it."

I paused, taken aback at his outburst. It wasn't like him, although I knew that news of his small likelihood of ever flying again had hit him pretty hard. This time I released a sigh. "Will, I know this isn't what you want. It's not what I would, either. But I hope you already knew that you and I, us, we're defined by other things besides the job we do."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"How about the fact that I love you and I'm grateful that you're still fucking alive, for starters," I retorted, getting angry at his attitude now. "And the fact that even if their dad never gets the chance to fly again, our kids will actually have their father present in their life?"

"I...I know that. But Natalie, without flying - "

"Without flying? What about without a pulse? Because that's what I thought you'd be just four short days ago before they told me you'd woken up." I stopped again for a moment to rein in my emotions; my throat was closing up and I had to swallow before going on. "You just haven't given it enough time, Will. You're getting better, even if your stubborn ass can't see it. I know it's hard, but don't let it all go."

Willis didn't get a chance to reply then since the orderly came in to take away the puke bucket and replace it with a new one. After that I didn't have much time to reflect on my dream, or my husband's battle with himself. My datapad rang and it all got put on the backburner.

"Hello? This is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," I answered.

"Colonel, this is Doctor Leedom on Qamar. We've...had a situation develop. We'd like to get you back to the island as soon as possible."

I glanced over at Willis suffering in his bed and my heart ached. "What's going on?"

"Do you remember me mentioning to you when you came down to survey

the chamber that we'd found an additional passage? That we wanted to look into where it led, but didn't have the time because of the portals?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. "Well, we finally got the chance to follow it along its length today, Cooper. It leads to another portal - a third active one we didn't know about before now."

"And?"

"It goes to Earth."

I tried not to let what I'd learned in the conversation show on my face. Willis didn't need anything else to worry about right now, and even if he knew, there was nothing he could do at the moment to help. "I understand, ma'am. I'll be there shortly."

I cut the connection then and turned back to my husband to find him having a hell of a time trying to drink out of the cup of water the orderly had brought by. I took the cup from his hand and held the straw steady for him so he could drink. "Hey, how about asking for help sometimes?"

A corner of his lips twitched. "I could say the same to you. Who was that?"

"One of the scientists we've got down in the ruins. They found something. I'm going to have to leave once you're done."

"Guess I better keep drinking then."

That made a smile break out on my face despite how irritated I'd been with him earlier. I took his hand and squeezed. "Just stop being so down on yourself and think of everything you've overcome already. You're doing good, Will. Time will do the rest."

\* \* \*

><p>Willis's best friend was once again the pilot who shuttled me back to the island. I was sitting in the troop bay in full gear with my helmet on, DMR in my lap with my head in my hands as I thought about what Leedom had just told me. Captain Heat's voice cut into my thoughts.<p>

"Natalie? How's he doing?"

I glanced up toward the intercom and sat up straighter, though I knew he could see me from the monitors in the cockpit. "Physically he's improving. He's in pain and having a rough time with the bad concussion, but he's getting better. Mentally though, all this talk of never flying again is taking its toll. He's mostly just very grouchy lately."

I heard him heave a sigh. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Yeah. Me too. But I see him growing stronger every day, so that gives me hope that he'll come out of his funk soon, too." Then I shook my head. "You know what I think would really help him

out?"

"What?"

"A visit from his buddy sometimes, instead of just his wife."

"I know, Cooper. I want to see him, but I guess I've just...been waiting for a good time. And to be honest, I don't really know what to say." He swallowed. "How do I tell him that I'm the one who put him into this mess?"

"Same way you told me, Heat." I planted my hands on my rifle then, gripping the cool metal at the barrel and stock. "Don't expect him to take it well at first, especially with the mood he's been in. But he needs his friend, Brandon. I think even if he doesn't show it right away, he'll appreciate you going to see him."

"I uh, I suppose I could do that."

"Good. Then I'll expect you to go visit the next time we're out there."

\* \* \*

><p>When we finally landed on Qamar, I was surprised to hear that the sounds of the fighting were fiercer and louder than when I'd left. I worried that something had happened since my departure for the mainland, but when I radioed my battalion commanders, all I heard back was that the Storm were being more aggressive than usual. Other than that, there was still no sign of more Prometheans yet, and the Remnant ship in orbit hadn't made any moves. I found it all curious, but for now, I decided to let my Marines handle it while I went back down to the ruins with my security detail to see what it was that Doctor Leedom wanted to show me.<p>

"So I hear we've got another portal in this place," I said to her once we met up. "And it leads right where we don't want it to go. Where is it?"

The lead scientist pointed to my six. "Behind the stairs, Colonel. I'll take you to it. The entrance is a little hard to find, but I'm sure we can - "

The earth suddenly quaking beneath our feet stopped whatever she'd been about to say mid-sentence. I tensed up immediately, shooting a look at the rest of the Marines down here, and held my DMR tight in my hands. "Status!" I yelled.

"We're all green across the board, ma'am!" one of the men shouted back. "Must be something up top!"

I exchanged a glance with Staff Sergeant Porter, who'd led my team down here. "Wonderful. Josh, let's get topside. Now."

## 36. Chapter 35: Fat Chance

### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Five: Fat Chance\*\*

Things were in chaos topside by the time we made it up. It didn't

seem as bad as the first day of the initial invasion, but something had clearly changed.

And it was amazing just how fast it had happened. I barely ducked out of the way as a rapid volley from a Storm rifle came at me, a tight burst that very nearly hit its intended target. Bringing my rifle up just as quick, I fired back, hearing the squawk of a Jackal as reward. It was nice to hear, but I knew from the weapon type that it hadn't been the bird who'd let loose the plasma rounds. Somewhere up ahead, there was an Elite.

I was looking down the sights of my DMR for the bastard when Porter came up beside me, half his squad in tow.

"Colonel! We need to find you a better spot!" he cried, ducking his own head low as another burst came for us. He answered with a punishing hail of lead from his SAW, then turned back to me. "We're not safe here!"

"Copy that!" I returned. "But neither's anywhere else, Staff! In case you haven't noticed, the whole terrain's open ground! We'll do what we can!"

"Yes, ma'am. But - "

"\_Move!\_"

I grabbed the staff sergeant by the shoulder then and pulled him roughly toward me, making him lose his balance and stumble momentarily to follow the action, SAW gripped tight in his hands. His expression was all wide-eyed surprise at first, but then he realized what I'd saved him from - a glowing green overcharged plasma shot that sizzled just past his helmeted head.

I noticed the abrupt change in his blue eyes when he saw how close he'd come to getting hit, but quickly focused back on what lay ahead. Alongside the Elite still gunning for us, a trio of Grunts had appeared, firing off plasma rounds of their own. I tagged the closest two and squeezed the trigger, bringing them down in three rapid bursts. Sky blue blood erupted from their bodies, one struck low in the gut, the other just above that in the center of its chest. Their attack was stopped, for now, but just behind them and to their flanks, dozens of their comrades remained.

"Porter!" I shouted to my aide, just now straightening up after I'd caught him a hair's breath away from death. "How the hell did things get this bad so quick?"

"Must've been their ship in orbit, ma'am! There weren't this many when we went underground!"

"You think the rest of their Phantoms finally deployed?"

"Safe bet!"

"\_Dammit\_." Then where the fuck is our close air support?"

Reflexively, I spared a quick glance at the sky. I could hear a few of the Broadwords and Pelicans up there, duking it out with forces

on the ground - but there weren't as many as there should be, and they were far away. In the midst of the fight, I opened up a COM channel to Major Collins, trying to keep my head from getting blown off in the process.

"Collins, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper!" I said.

"Ma'am?"

"Where's our wings? We need 'em up to support now!"

"Yes, ma'am! We're working on it! Right now I've got my squadrons split watching the ground and the air closer to orbit. We've got the last of the Phantoms and Banshees to deal with!"

"Acknowledged! Just shake them as soon as you can, things are getting pretty crowded on the surface!"

"Will do, Colonel."

"Good! Cooper out."

Another bolt of plasma shot past me, heating the air next to my left shoulder. I turned and looked for the perpetrator, intent on sending the alien to the afterlife, but there were suddenly so many I couldn't tell from this distance which it might've been. I settled for aiming at the closest one and let a series of successive bursts rip from my DMR. That sent one of the Elites at the forefront packing, dark violet blood dripping from its wounds as it hit Qamar's sandy dirt.

"Ma'am, we need to get you to cover."

Beside me, Staff Sergeant Porter was still at it, trying to convince me to stay out of the fight. Keeping my eyes trained downrange on the battle, I huffed a sigh.

"Where?"

"Some of Major Warfield's Marines've set up a barricade on our right flank, just ahead of the command and med-tent outside the chamber entrance," Porter replied. "All due respect, but I think that'd be a good place to start."

I rattled off another tight burst and nodded. "Okay, Staff. Lead the way."

Even with a security detail surrounding me, maneuvering through the fight proved to be tough with all that was going on around us. We moved as fast as possible, pausing every now and then to unleash some suppressive fire before continuing on our path. We finally reached the hastily erected barricade - made up of spent ammo and supply crates - in the next couple of minutes. Because my luck was so shitty, I ended up taking cover just a few Marines away from the 904th's commander himself.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, ma'am," he shouted to me above the din, squeezing off a flurry of bullets at the oncoming enemy as he did so. "It's good to see you back on the island - where you should be. Last

I checked, we defeated the Storm on the mainland. And the Prometheans have yet to reach it."

Anger bubbled up inside me in an instant. Obviously whatever reprieve the major had decided to grant me while my husband was dying was over now that Willis was doing fairly well and recuperating. And this sure as hell answered the question as to whether my talk with Warfield had actually done me any good in terms of how he viewed me and my decisions.

I held onto my DMR hard, determined not to show how livid I was. "Last I checked, Major, I was in charge of all groundside operations - and while I'll admit most are here, they extend beyond the reach of this one patch of land in the water."

The major snorted. "Yeah? How's Major Hawk doing?"

I shook my head and chose not to deign that with a response. Instead, I peered over the edge of the crate I was behind and looked for something more constructive to do with my rage - like take on the ex-Covenant.

"Marines, focus your fire on the Elites first!" I yelled to the group. "Once they're down, all we need to do is mop up the rest! We'll get air support shortly, so we just need to hold out! If you've got grenades left, now would be a good time to use 'em!"

That last order brought us closer to stemming the tide as several Marines on my left and right pulled frags off their belts and heaved them at the enemy. I ducked along with a few others as one of them fell short - not enough to harm any of us, but certainly enough that we got a little spooked.

As I straightened after it detonated, debris from the explosion raining down on my helmet and uniform, I looked over at Porter again.

"You were right, Josh!" I barked at him over the sounds. "Just talked to Collins. The Remnant let loose the rest of their aircraft!"

"Why now?" my aide shouted back.

I don't know why I did it, but I spared a glance behind us, just to see if there was any additional enemy movements we needed to be aware of. My eyes instantly went wide before I checked the reaction and buckled down. My instincts had once again proven their worth.

"I think that might have something to do with it, Staff!" Before Porter had a chance to respond, I was already opening a regiment-wide channel. "Marines of the 52nd, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper! We've got Prometheans teleporting in on our six! Major Warfield, your Marines are first in line, so hunker down and take them! We can't get surrounded!"

The rest I left up to Warfield, even though as a very recent former battalion commander, I was itching to dish the next commands myself. If he was sharp, which I knew he was outside of his unwavering attitude problems, he'd realize he needed to maneuver his companies very carefully in order to make sure they didn't get caught between the Storm and Promethean forces.



Something that was already happening as we fought, so he needed to act fast.

For my part, I looked to my aide and gave him a slight nod from behind cover, signalling that we needed to find a new spot to roost where we could do the most good - and without having to worry about getting shot in the back in the process. The staff sergeant got up cautiously first, barking orders to his squad, and then together we moved with our heads ducked and rifles tucked into our middles as we went past Warfield's Marines.

When we reached the disgruntled major, I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Good luck, Cole. Stop them in their tracks."

"I know what to do, ma'am," he answered roughly. To prove his point, I heard him start to give out orders of his own to his men while we continued on. I did nothing about it for the moment, but kept the interaction in mind for later.

"Colonel! What's our heading?" Porter asked me then. I'd taken point even though the security detail had risen before me to make sure the coast was clear.

"To the command tent, Staff! We need to clear it out before the Prometheans can reach it!"

"And the med-tent, ma'am?"

"No time to evacuate that! We just need to make sure its defenses are up! Hail Major Harris!"

"On it!"

We were still in the process of moving behind Warfield's wall of Marines set up all along the slowly sloping hill when a violent blast from one of the Scorpion tanks hit close. I was blown several feet in the air as the impact gave gravity much less of a hold on my body than it should have, and landed hard in the packed sand, groaning. My chest felt like it was on fire, and my elbows and knees ached despite the strategically placed body armor.

"Colonel! Are you all right?"

I forced my chin up, feeling the sting of the hit even if my helmet had protected me from damage. Something had gone wrong because I could taste blood in my mouth. I spat it out on the ground before speaking. "F-fine, Josh. Just...rattled."

I pushed myself up then, noticing for the first time that there were bloody scrapes along my palms. I figured if that was all it was, I'd done pretty good.

My heart still didn't feel like it was beating right, though, and I got a feeling of intense vertigo when I stood.

"Watch it!" Porter said as he caught me under an arm. "You're sure you're okay, ma'am?"

"Well, I sure as hell better be," I coughed out. "I don't have time

to see Doc right now."

I shrugged out of his grip and opened a COM channel to the tank operators, ignoring my irregular heartbeat. "Tankers, make sure you are not targeting friendlies! Watch your fire! We've got enemies coming up dead ahead and on our six, so make sure you've got clear lanes before you launch that ordnance!" \_Because you damn near took our heads off,\_ I added to myself.

I stood there a moment longer, waiting for the rhythm in my chest to catch up with itself as acknowledgment lights winked green on my HUD. Finally it did, and I took that as a sign to continue forward at a faster clip. "Let's move, Josh! We've got to get to command. Now!"

\* \* \*

><p>The inside of the command tent was all anxious movement when we arrived. Holotables were flashing red with reports of incoming enemy fighters, both in the air and on the ground. Aides were rushing to get the updates out to the commanders in the field, headed by a strangely calm-looking Major Harris.<p>

I stepped inside the tent fast, moving past the lights and the noise and deeply perturbed enlisted Marines, and made way towards my former XO.

"Shawn, good to see you," I said to him with a curt nod, pulling off my helmet after I slung my DMR behind my back. "Not under these circumstances, though. We need to get you guys out of here. Now."

"Ma'am?"

I pointed to the closest holomap. "Obviously these don't update as quickly as we'd like them to. We've got Prometheans in the mix now as well. They're headed here."

"How - "

"\_Now\_, Major," I repeated firmly. "I'm getting the Marines and scientists out of the ruins, too. This was the last straw and we can't take on much more, even with all the resources we've thrown at this damn thing."

He peered at me for a second. "What are you saying?"

"I'm tired of the sneak attacks, Harris. It's too much of a risk. We're blowing the chamber today."

\* \* \*

><p>Between Major Harris and myself, we got the command tent evacuated in no time. As soon as everyone had left, minus me and Porter's squad, I opened a COM channel via one of the holotables to the Marine in charge of security in the ruins. First Lieutenant Sjacvk answered promptly.<p>

"Ma'am?"

"Lieutenant, I need you to escort the scientists out of the chamber,"

I said to him. "Right now. Make sure they're safely topside with Second Lieutenant Jakobsen's platoon, and then the rest of you haul ass out of there. You've got fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes? Colonel, all due respect, but I don't think the scientists can - "

"I'm giving our demo team the order to remote detonate as soon as you're all out. So I suggest you move fast."

There was a slight pause, then, "Understood, ma'am."

"Good. I want to be notified the second you're up top and everyone is out of the blast zone. Cooper out."

"Colonel, please, ma'am, wait one."

"What's wrong?"

"Doctor Leedom wants to speak with you, ma'am. She says it's urgent and it'll only take a minute."

"I don't have a minute, Lieutenant. We're very close to getting sandwiched between the Storm and Prometheans out here. We need to plug the hole up right now."

"Ma'am...I'm sorry, but she's insistent."

I heaved a frustrated sigh. "All right. Put her on."

"Colonel Cooper?" came Leedom's voice over the radio.

"Yes, ma'am. I can give you thirty seconds, no more. We're in a tough spot at the moment."

"So I've heard. We're getting evacuated again?"

"Affirmative."

"But the portal to Earth we just discovered," she said frantically. "We'll lose access to it. And all the other research..."

I put a hand to my temple and looked down at my boots, covered in dirt and a bit of my blood. "I know. But we can't afford to keep the backdoor open any longer. I'm sorry, Doctor, but this is it. And at least we know that if we can't get to the Earth portal, then neither can the Prometheans or Storm."

Silence filled the line for what felt like a long time. When the lead scientist came back on, her voice was full of anguished disappointment.

"Cooper, your mother would have opposed this. You don't realize everything we're about to lose down here."

A hard edge slipped into my tone then, more out of hurt than anything else. "My mother is dead, Doctor Leedom. Precisely because she let her science come before her own life, and almost before the life of my son. Believe you me, I'd much rather have her alive with lost data than dead with what she learned. Because all those facts sure as hell

didn't comfort me and my brothers and my sister when she was killed. My order stands."

"Very well. Lieutenant Sjacvk? The colonel would like us to leave now."

\* \* \*

><p>Thirteen minutes later I got the hail. By now I could hear the sounds of Harris's Marines holding off the Prometheans from getting to the med-tent or ours in my skull - the action was just that close.<p>

As the command tent and the holotables inside vibrated from the nearby detonations, I placed my hands on the main console. "This is Cooper. Go ahead."

"Ma'am, Lieutenant Sjacvk. We're clear."

"You're sure everyone's safe? All the scientists and Marines?"

"Yes, ma'am. All accounted for and doing okay, if a little shaken. We're hunkered down behind Major Harris's forward line, Colonel. Ready when you are."

"Right. Standby."

I took in a deep breath and exchanged one last look with Staff Sergeant Porter. He stood a few feet away, not leaning against the other table as he had been before, but up and alert now. Prepared to fight.

"Now or never, ma'am."

"Yeah," I murmured. Before I lost my nerve, I struck up a link to my little brother.

"Captain Cooper here," he said.

I folded my arms across my chest, steadying myself. "Trav, it's me."

"Hey, big sis. You okay?"

"I'm fine. You?"

"Just dandy. What's up?"

"It's time, Travis."

The surprise was clear in his voice. I didn't think he thought I'd actually do it. "You want the ruins gone?"

"Yes. Everybody's already out. We just need your boys and girls to press the button. Do it now, Captain."

"Yes, ma'am. Give us one and hold on tight."

In those few seconds before I felt the earth quake beneath my boots, I retreated in my head, thinking about the choice I made. I'd never

quite made one on this scale before.

Captain Rhodes had told me that the decision was at my discretion, that if I ever felt the situation warranted it, I needed to be prepared to do what I had to to keep everyone safe. Yet now, that included not just us on the island, but the people of Khan and the people of Earth as well. I just hoped the scientists had studied enough of the ruins to get whatever knowledge we might need out of them for the future.

Because as of now, the underground ruins of Qamar Island - and the active and inactive portals to other worlds that they'd housed - were gone forever.

### 37. Chapter 36: Checkmate

**\*\*Chapter Thirty-Six: Checkmate\*\***

\*\*\*\*\*1830 Hours, March 15, 2558. City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Regroup," Outer Colonies. Day Twenty-Five of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*\*\*\*

I sat at the bar of Mayor Javier Laraza's nightclub on the mainland, trying not to stare longingly at the colorful selection of liquor behind the counter. I wanted a drink so bad my throat felt dry, even though I'd already downed most of the large glass of soda water I'd ordered. Twenty minutes later, my salivary glands were still going wild at the prospect of getting satisfied by alcohol. After my embarrassing showing last time, though, I wasn't about to repeat my mistake. I knew for a fact that after all that had occurred the past week and a half - and the momentous decision I'd had to make on Qamar - that once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop. So the best option was to keep myself in check before I began, no matter how difficult that might be.

Finally I caught a glimpse of Lieutenant Commander Courtney Hayden weaving her way through the crowd. It was early still so business hadn't quite picked up as much as I'd hoped for our meeting, but it was enough for our purposes. Hiding in plain sight and all that. I raised my glass at the ONI operative to indicate where I was, though I was pretty sure she'd seen me already without me even noticing. Spooks tended to do that.

"Cooper," she said, giving me a nod as she took a seat on the stool beside me. While I was conspicuous in my uniform - a fresh one for the occasion, not the ravaged one I'd been wearing in the battle for the past couple weeks - Hayden was dressed in civvies. Nothing flashy, but she blended in with the rest much better than I did. Her ONI fatigues would have drawn more attention to us than my battledress did, and I didn't want anyone knowing what she was.

"Hayden," I replied. I took another sip of water, still wishing for something stronger, then set the cup back down. "So? What have I missed around here while we've been busy dealing with Armageddon over on the island?"

"Not a whole lot, to be honest," she answered. "Laraza has apparently been focusing all his attentions on his establishment lately. The

Marines at the staging camp haven't reported any issues for some time now."

I snorted. "I'm not sure if I should be grateful about that or worried."

"I think you've got quite enough on your plate for now. Let us worry about what's happening with the rebs. If something happens, I'll let you know."

I stared down into my glass. "Do you think that means Laraza will go for what we need?"

She shrugged. "Unfortunately I don't know the reason for the sudden loss of interest yet. I can't tell if he's too preoccupied with his business and political career to make a move, or if he's just as concerned about Khan's fate as the rest of us and wants to give you some breathing room to get that taken care of."

"Well, none of those were things he was too worried about before. That never stopped him in the past."

"True, but I think having you come to him for help twice already - three times, if you count today - might give him the impression that things are dire enough out there on Qamar to leave you alone."

"I guess I'll find out soon, huh?"

I finished off the last of the water then, still disappointed that it wasn't enough to take the edge off, even just a little. I finally caved and signalled the bartender to give me a single shot of whiskey.

"Close the tab," I told him, just so I wouldn't be tempted to get more.

The bartender, a very good-looking man about my age, flashed me a charming grin. "Not necessary, ma'am. All compliments of Mr. Laraza. He says he'll be ready for you in a few minutes."

"All right. Thanks."

As I watched him go, Hayden let out a short laugh beside me, something I hadn't heard from her since she'd arrived on-planet. I looked over at the spook and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Before your eyes fall out of your head looking at the bartender, how's Willis doing?"

My cheeks went a little red despite myself. I covered it up by finishing off my shot. "Much better, thank you very much. I went to see him before I came over here and left him with his brother and his best friend." I set the empty glass down when I was done and stared at my hands on the counter. "He still gripes a lot about not being able to fly, but physically he's well on his way to a full recovery."

"That's good to hear," Hayden said.

"Yeah. I'm very grateful for it."

"Couldn't ask for a better present on your thirty-first birthday, right?"

A small half-smile formed on my face and I scratched at the side of my head. "Definitely. Can you believe I forgot all about it until just now?"

"I believe it, Cooper. You've been running yourself ragged lately. If you want my advice, you could use an evening of downtime tonight. Keep yourself fresh for the fight."

"We'll see. There's still a lot to do out there on the island, Courtney."

"I know. But everything's riding on your shoulders now," she said, getting up slowly from her seat. "You should take care of yourself sometimes too so you can be at your best for your Marines." She gave a very subtle tilt of her blonde head then, showing me that Laraza was on his way. "Happy birthday, ma'am. I'll see you down the road."

"Yeah, thanks."

The lieutenant commander deftly disappeared then among the growing crowd, blending into the throng of people seamlessly. I was sure the rebel leader/town mayor never even saw she was there.

Always one for theatrics, Javier Laraza gave me a slight bow as he approached. "Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," he said. "Welcome back. I trust you find the service here adequate?"

"More than adequate, Mayor." I gave a self-deprecating snort. "I'm just trying not make an idiot of myself again like I did last time. I apologize for that, by the way. I'm something of a functional alcoholic these days."

Laraza smiled wide, but I knew him well enough by now that I didn't fool myself into thinking it was out of friendliness or understanding. More like he was laughing at me than with me. He realized now that I had a pretty big crutch, and he was enjoying knowing I had a weakness he could exploit. "That is fine, Cooper. And more than understandable given the circumstances, I'm sure." He threw me a look. "How is the campaign on the island proceeding? Your husband's health has improved?"

"Yes to the last, which has lightened my mental load considerably. As for Qamar, things are...well, to be frank, shit's really hit the fan recently. We're deadlocked with the Remnant and Promethean forces right now. That's where I was hoping you and your men would come in to help."

"Ah. Always something with you, Colonel."

"Nothing that benefits me, I can assure you. This is for your own citizens, Laraza. Not to mention your business."

He heaved a sigh. "What has happened now?"

I absently twirled my empty shot glass around my fingers on the bar. Some were still a little sore from the fighting. The scrapes across my hands were all healed now, though. "I had to blow the ancient ruins on the island ten days ago. It's a long story, but it turns out that's where a handful of our Storm buddies were coming from, and where all the Prometheans were rushing out of."

The mayor gave me a curious glance. "How?"

"Portals. You had almost half a dozen of them right under your damn noses. I told you you should've cleaned up your backyard sooner."

Laraza's face went from perplexed to livid in an instant. "And I told you many weeks ago that we simply lacked the resources to do so."

"Lucky for you, we're here now. So your option is to help us again, or to try to tackle this on your own when we're gone. Your choice."

"Ah, yes? And how do I know you're not bluffing for free aid?"

I didn't bother replying right away. I just pulled my datapad out of the breast pocket of my uniform jacket, tapped on a couple of the icons, and brought up a high-resolution photo of what remained of the underground chamber. "Because I had to resort to this to make sure my three battalions of Marines weren't outnumbered and overrun by the enemy. And if we found ourselves in a tough spot, you can bet your ass your men and women would be fried in less time than it takes you to blink if they tried to contain what's on Qamar by themselves."

I let him chew on that for a moment before bringing in the kicker. "And Laraza?"

He looked over at me, his expression still an angry one.

"If we do this right, this could be it. With your help, and with the portals gone, we could get the Storm and Prometheans off of Khan for good."

"And then you would leave?"

"Like I've said before, that part's not up to me. But what I do know is that you can't afford this level of alien activity so close to your home."

He thought it over for several minutes, so long that I wondered if he might refuse - or have me kicked out of his club or shot again for even bringing it up. Eventually, though, I saw something shift in his features, and when he turned to me once more, he looked determined.

"There is something you should know then, Colonel, if we are to help."

"What's that?"



His not-so-friendly smile came back. "I believe you consider yourself to be a very sharp woman, Natalie Cooper. And in many respects, you are. Yet in this situation, you have not thought of everything."

I frowned. "How do you mean?"

Laraza pointed up at the ceiling. "The Remnant ship in space. How do you plan on eliminating it?"

"We have a ship of our own, Mr. Laraza. You know that."

"And yet you fail to attack it. Why?"

I didn't want to tell him it was because the Ex didn't have nearly as much firepower as the Suave Affair had, and the Affair was currently space debris. "Well, I told you earlier that our other ship didn't fare so well. Now we're a bit...hesitant to reengage with the only one we've got left."

"What if I told you we had one of our own?"

That piqued my interest, but I caught myself before I got too excited. I leaned forward against the counter and smirked. "I gotta hand it to you, Laraza. You're good. Almost made me believe that, but if you guys've got a boat in orbit of your own, we would've known about it the moment we showed up in-system."

"Not if it is a stealth ship."

"And how would you even have access to one?"

The rebel leader's smile never left his face. "You show your inexperience with galactic affairs - or should I say, matters not confined to the Inner Colonies," he replied. "The Jackal pirates out here do not trade only in arms and ordnance, Colonel. There are larger, more coveted war relics to be had, for the right price...or with the right persuasion."

"Okay. Say I take your word for it. Even if by some miracle both the UNSC and the Storm didn't detect it, I know you'd never let us borrow it."

"Borrow it, no. Aid in your efforts to rid our planet of extraterrestrial nuisances, perhaps."

"Yeah? And what's that going to cost us?"

"Your next permanent outpost on Khan. We do not want you government types interfering here again."

At least until the next time one of these aliens shows up, I thought to myself. To Laraza, I said, "I just might be able to arrange that. But you know that means that if anything like this ever happens in the future, we won't be here to back you up."

"I understand the risks, but I do not believe the Storm will return now that their holy site is gone. And above all, we want what was promised from the start - you Marines off our planet."

I thought it over for another minute, but really, there wasn't much to debate. If what Laraza was saying was true, and the rebels really did have their own stealth ship in orbit that had no doubt been customized by the pirates to be armed to the teeth, it might be the final push we needed to rid Qamar - and Khan - of the alien presence for good.

Finally, I took in a breath and nodded. "All right. Let me speak with the mission commander, and I'll let you know what he decides by tomorrow. We've got to send the message to the brass back on Earth so it could take a while, but I'm sure they'll be interested in the offer."

It was disconcerting, but the smile stayed plastered on the mayor's face. "Interest is not what matters here, Cooper. What I'm giving you is a great tool you could never hope to come up with on your own in time. I suggest you try to convince your superiors of its importance when you speak with them."

### 38. Chapter 37: Peaks and Valleys

#### \*\*Chapter Thirty-Seven: Peaks and Valleys\*\*

The staging camp was quiet by the time I got back a little while later. Most of the extra equipment, ordnance, and vehicles we'd managed to procure from the Excalibur when it had first arrived were no longer being housed here, but already deployed in the fight against the Remnant and Prometheans on the island. More than quiet it looked empty, as even the company of Marines I'd left here in reserve to watch over the place - since rotated out with another of Major Brewer's companies - seemed restless, eager to rejoin the battle with their brothers and sisters in arms. It almost felt like a ghost town if it weren't for the field hospital and the mess.

Since I was without any weapons or armor for this trip, except my sidearm, I used my datapad to contact the Marines on guard duty to let them know I was back.

"Perimeter watch, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper. I'm coming up on the central gates. Hold your fire."

"Ma'am, this is Master Sergeant Ian Björn. Copy."

I passed through the entrance shortly thereafter, the Marines there giving me a nod of acknowledgment as I walked past rather than saluting. While it was probably no secret to the locals that I was the one in charge, the custom of not saluting your superiors in a combat zone remained in place.

Once I was safely inside the lines, I stopped by the mess for a moment for a quick cup of coffee and a bite to eat, then walked back outside to make my call to Captain Rhodes. Laraza's proposition was a dream one, but I wasn't so sure we could trust him - and with good reason. And yet he'd been right. It was still the best shot we had at ending all this.

"Colonel Cooper," I heard the Navy officer say over the link. "What do you have for me?"

"Something that might be of interest to all of us, sir," I replied. "I just spoke to Mayor Laraza about getting us some help out on Qamar. He's agreed to send us an additional two companies of his men."

"That's uncharacteristically generous of him. Originally the two of you had agreed on only one company in case of need, am I right?"

"Yes, sir. Looks like he wants the aliens off Khan as bad as we do."

"Hmm. But I get the sense there's more to the story there. What else did he say?"

I glanced around at my surroundings again, making sure that no one else was nearby to hear this before I spoke. "Well, he kind of dropped a bomb on me, sir. Not literally, although I'm sure based on our history he would like to. He said the rebs've got a stealth ship in orbit. Any way that might be true?"

The captain snorted. "It's Laraza. Anything's possible. If you're asking if we've noticed anything out here since we've arrived, then the answer is no. Then again it's a stealth ship, and if he's got one waiting on the far side of the planet - the half that was glassed - it's not too far-fetched to think we might've overlooked it."

Nodding to myself, I looked down at the ground. "So what does this mean for us then, sir? I know he could be bluffing and he's a homicidal asshole at least part of the time, but if it's true, we really need that ship to get rid of the Storm."

"Right you are, Colonel. This does put us in a bind." He paused for a second, then continued, "I'll send a mission update to Admiral Dartmouth about it. I think this should be up to the brass to decide. I'll let you know as soon as I hear a response back how to proceed."

"Understood, sir. And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, keep up the good work. I know things've gotten dicey since the ruins were blown, but you did the right thing given the circumstances, Cooper. Just remain on track for now, try to stay a step ahead of the Prometheans and Storm on Qamar, and standby for additional orders."

"Yes, sir. Will do."

"Excellent. Rhodes out."

\* \* \*

><p>Only after everything was done was I finally able to get back to the hospital to see Willis. I'd stopped by earlier when I'd first arrived on the mainland, but it had been a quick visit, mostly just to say hi and leave him there with Matthew and Heat while I attended to business. By now it was nearly 2000 hours and I was beat, my body battered from the fighting on the island and my mind whirling from my talk with Hayden and Laraza and Rhodes - and what that might mean for

all of us.<p>

I decided that so far, it hadn't been one of the best birthdays on record for me. But I supposed there was still time for that to change.

When I walked into my husband's room, I was surprised to see him up on his feet and dressed. He was no longer stripped from the waist up lying beneath the blankets in his boxers and shorts, but wearing the pants of his fatigues, a T-shirt, and his socks and boots. The only part of his fresh uniform missing was his jacket, which was draped over the chair I'd sat on all the times I'd visited. His dogtags hung around his neck as they always had, and he stood leaning against one of the corners of the bed with his arms folded across his chest, looking upset. Matthew was standing by the door, also sporting a dour expression.

I frowned and looked from one Hawk brother to the other. "I'm guessing I missed something? What happened?"

Matthew didn't respond, but glanced over at his older brother instead. Willis released a long sigh before finally meeting my gaze.

"There's good news and bad news, Coop." He ran a hand over his light brown hair, and I noticed he could finally do so with his injured hand without wincing. "You've probably noticed Heat's gone now; I kicked him out. That's the bad news."

I made a face but didn't say anything, letting him continue.

"The good news is that Doctor Kiev came by and gave me my last check-up after you left. He says I'm good to go to leave the hospital tonight."

My eyes went wide at first, but that didn't hold a candle to the grin that spread across my face. "Honey, that's great."

"Yeah." A small smile crept over Willis's features, too. "So now I can help you celebrate your birthday. Didn't think I forgot about it, did you?"

"Nope," I replied, still grinning. "I knew you wouldn't."

Beside me, Matthew made an obvious coughing sound. "I think that's my cue to leave. Nat, happy birthday. Big bro, I'll see you again before we take off."

"Sounds good, little brother. Come here."

Willis drew his baby brother into a big bear hug. I saw that while Willis gave him a squeeze, Matthew was careful not to hug back too hard. He may have just been released from the hospital, but I knew my husband's ribs were probably still giving him some trouble - along with a fair amount of pain. After they let each other go, I gave my brother-in-law a wave and he was gone, off to the barracks for the night.

That left Willis and I alone in the room. I crossed the remaining distance between us and kissed him, glad that I didn't have any armor

or a rifle on me this time to hamper things. And that he was well enough to be walking around now. He kissed me back, pulling me closer by threading one of his hands in my hair. It made my bun look a little messy, but I didn't mind.

"I missed you, Cooper."

"I missed you, too, Will."

We kissed a second time, then a third, before realizing where we were. The door to Willis's hospital room was still open, so we broke apart for the moment while I went over to close it. Then I turned to face him again, curious as to what had gone on while I'd been busy meeting with Oliver's widow and Laraza.

"So? I take it your talk with Heat didn't go well."

My husband shook his head. "No." Then he sighed again. "Jesus, Natalie. I get that he made a mistake, and it can happen to anyone, even the best of pilots. I can't even really say it was his fault; I know he's not incompetent and he'd never risk my life like that on purpose. But...he's still the one who put me here. I can't fucking fly because of him. And that hits a damn huge nerve whether I want it to or not. You know the only other thing I'd get worked up about is something happening to you or the kids. So I just...I can't be his buddy right now."

"I get it. I gave him a pretty hard time at first when he told me, too," I said. "Actually, I was pissed as hell at him over it for almost two weeks, up until you woke up from a coma. I told him I'd never forgive him if you died, and I meant it." I swallowed before going on. "But I've talked to him a little since then, Will. He was afraid to come see you but I could tell he was really torn up about it. I know you'll probably need some time with this, just like I did, but try not to make any rash decisions about your friendship yet. At the end of the day, we've all known each other for years and he's been like a brother to you, and helped us out with Gabriel once to boot. So just...keep all that in mind."

Willis snorted. "I have a brother, Natalie. I don't need him anymore."

I frowned again and wanted to say more, but I didn't want to push him on it - or spend the evening arguing. It'd taken me quite some time to not actively hate Brandon for what he'd done, so I knew this was probably worse for Willis.

"Okay. Nevermind." I nodded to his get-up. "What's the deal with your injuries? You're looking a lot better these days, but I didn't think you were ready to get back out in the wild just yet."

That brought a ghost of a smile to his lips. "What can I say? I guess some of your encouraging words and quick-healing magic rubbed off on me."

"Oh, now you're just flattering me."

"You're my wife, honey. How can I not?"

I rolled my eyes at him, though a small smirk remained on my face,

too. "Are you going to tell me or not?"

"Maybe." He moved in a bit closer to nuzzle my neck. "Or maybe I can show you."

I let out a brief chuckle and closed my eyes for a moment before reopening them. I was enjoying his proximity to me - and the sudden rush of emotion and desire that sprung up because of it. For now, though, I forced my brain to get ahead of my hormones in this case and asked him, "Is that even something you're...cleared to do now? Would it hurt you?"

"I don't know yet. But we can try."

His lips found mine again and it felt like my mind had shut down. I noticed that he was slowly backing me up towards the door, but not much else besides the way his closeness was making me feel. I'd had a hell of a long past month dealing with the invasion, then thinking he was going to die, then watching him slowly struggle to recover the past few weeks - all while trying to manage everything on Qamar - that I just didn't have much brain capacity left. But that was okay with me, because I was about ready to let the world figure out its own damn problems for a couple hours.

My husband's hands had already reached for my jacket when I was able to think enough to stop him. "Will, we can't do this here."

"Why not?" he asked, his voice low.

"Because we can easily get caught here, and I can't afford that," I answered. Then I smirked at him. "But did I tell you I have my own private quarters in the barracks?"

Willis grinned in return. "Lead the way, Colonel."

\* \* \*

><p>I was pretty sure I'd never walked anywhere so fast in my life. Willis followed closely behind, demonstrating that he'd indeed healed up very well in the last several weeks since his crash.<p>

Once inside, neither of us stopped to admire the luxuries I'd been afforded thanks to my rank - we were too focused on each other and getting to the bunk for that. I thanked my lucky stars I'd already pulled off my bulkier pieces of gear - my helmet and armor plates - when I'd first arrived, then enjoyed an extended make out session as my husband resumed trying to unbutton my jacket.

He was halfway done and I'd already pulled his own shirt up and over his head when he suddenly stopped. Breathing hard now, I opened my eyes and looked at him, concerned.

"What is it?"

He glanced down at his hands in disbelief, his chest heaving as well. "Fuck. I'm sorry, Coop."

I followed his gaze and saw that it led to the two fingers he'd broken when his Pelican had gone down, healed up now but obviously still painful with certain motions.

"My fingers...these buttons are giving me hell."

"Will, it's okay. We don't have to do this if you're not ready."

"No. I want to. I can. I just...I might need some help."

I wasn't sure why but his vulnerable admission made me smile, and I loved him even more for it. I took his head in my hands and gave him a deep, passionate kiss, careful to be gentle with the rest of him.

"Don't worry. We'll take it slow and I'll do the work. Just tell me if something starts bothering your ribs or your fingers again." I flashed a mischievous grin. "And remember when I got shot a couple months ago? We had to get a little creative because I was hurt, but we still managed."

Finally the smile returned to his face. "That was a really great night, Cooper."

I finished undoing the buttons on my jacket and threw it on the floor, then pulled my own T-shirt off and gradually pushed him backwards toward the bunk. "Yeah, it was."

We got rid of the rest of our clothes quickly, and then Willis situated himself on the bed first, lying on his back before I got on with him, crawling over him. When I did, he leaned up and kissed my bare arms and my shoulders and my chest, making me close my eyes and shiver at the sensations. This was exactly what both of us needed right now - time for us. Time to recover. Time to forget.

"I love you, Willis," I whispered to him softly, finally leaning down to kiss him again.

"I love you, too, Natalie," he said, kissing me back. Then he smirked. "I'm thinking tonight's going to be even better."

### 39. Chapter 38: Mirror Image

#### **\*\*Chapter Thirty-Eight: Mirror Image\*\***

Once we were satisfied and spent, we both fell into a deep sleep. For Willis, that was a good thing; it helped finish healing his wounds and rest his overtaxed body. For me, it should've done the same - but without my pills for the nightmares, I was subject to getting my subconscious ripped to shreds in my dreams.

And tonight, just like every other night since I'd stopped taking them, it did.

Because I'd gone over two weeks without my pills now, the nightmares were starting to get more elaborate. Tonight, instead of only reliving my memories, the past was contorted, getting twisted in the most awful of ways. Even though the reality had already been hellish enough.

When I was thrust into the dream world, I found myself back on the

Tsavo Highway five years ago. The shrapnel from the Scorpion tank that had exploded right next to me and my best friend, First Lieutenant Dean Lewis, was embedded in my right arm, just like it had been in real life that day. I could feel the blood running down my wrist and off my fingertips, and my dislocated shoulder burned in acute pain, but for some reason I didn't think to do anything about it yet. I just kept walking in the fog, passing by more blown-out pieces of the convoy on the way. And bodies.

Eventually I stopped paying attention to my surroundings since it all looked the same - like it was on an endless loop. Instead I glanced down at my body armor, dented and blackened from the blast, and then down to my combat boots, covered in dirt and blood. The signs of battle were all there, but in the distance, I could hear nothing. It was eerily quiet, and that put me on edge. With my left hand, I slowly raised my pistol up, ready for whatever might pop out.

Not being able to see more than a few feet in front of me was disconcerting. I wished fervently for another living soul, anyone...and then, stumbling through what was left of the roadway, I saw a figure. He was distant, almost part of the fog himself, but I could just make out his features enough to tell who it was.

Lewis.

"Dean!" I cried out to him. "Hey, buddy, over here!"

For a brief moment I felt elated, as if I'd been left on a deserted island and had finally found my salvation. But as my best friend's form started to crystallize and grew more detailed, I nearly dropped my gun in shock.

My redheaded friend was dripping blood everywhere - all down his face, down his battledress jacket and pants, even his own boots. As he kept walking closer towards me, I could see he bore all the wounds that had killed him that day on the highway. And seeing him like that again, I just couldn't take.

I dropped quietly to my knees in the dream, my mouth open in horror yet no sound came out. I felt my eyes well up and tears spilled down my cheeks, and suddenly I was sobbing harder than I ever had before. In the meantime Dean's ghost finally came to a halt right in front of me and grinned down at my grief - not a creepy smile that someone in my nightmares should've had, but one of the genuine ones he used to give me when we were joking around with each other during lulls in the battle. Just like old times.

Except that he was bleeding and very clearly dead.

"Natalie," he said in his British accent. "What on earth are you doing sitting there on the ground? We've a war to fight, you know. And you've a husband and son I know you want nothing more than to return home to as quickly as possible. Get on with it."

"Dean," I choked out through the tears. "Jesus Christ, you're..."

Lewis just cocked his head to the side and raised a red eyebrow, still smiling. "I'm what, Captain?"



"You're dead."

He gave me a perplexed look, obviously confused. He glanced down at his hands and waved them around a little. "Hmm. No, I don't believe that's true. You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not. Can't you see the blood?"

A hearty rumble of laughter came from behind us then, and I whipped my head around, my pulse going wild in my ears. When I turned I saw it was my other best friend, Major Oliver Hayden. He had his fatal wounds on display as well, but strangely, there was no blood. He just smelled overwhelmingly like burnt flesh, making my nose wrinkle. I almost gagged.

"Cooper, seriously, stop messing around," Hayden said to me, stopping at my feet behind me just like Dean had on the other side. "The waterworks aren't going to help us finish this thing. Get up. We need your help."

"My help for what?"

Oliver looked at me like I was stupid. "Killing Covies? And the Flood? And the rebels and the Storm? They aren't just going to wake up one morning and decide this was all a mistake and take off, you know. We do have to actually go after them." He smirked at me. "Did you forget that, or did you just have a really good time at the bar last night?"

"I didn't drink anything," I responded flatly. I tried to wipe at my cheeks but they stayed wet. "And I want to help you guys, I do. You're just gone, and there's nothing I can do about it."

Suddenly I was wracked by sobs again. Lewis and Hayden just hovered over me now, not saying a word, but still smiling.

"I miss you both so much," I said to them. "So fucking much, but no matter what I do, I can't go back. I can't save you."

Finally I felt utterly depleted of energy; it felt like the sobs had sucked all of it out. I collapsed on the road, not even able to raise my head off the ground, and the pain of my own wounds on my right arm and shoulder intensified to a blinding sting. "I'm sorry," I whispered to my friends.

I shut my eyes in the dream and expected it to end there. But it didn't. A moment later I was opening them again, and this time, there were three figures standing above me instead of two - crowding me now as I lay prone in the street.

The third one was Travis.

\* \* \*

><p>I felt my leg twitch hard the instant I woke up, and the intense thudding of my heart in my chest made it difficult to breathe. I sucked in a deep breath urgently, taking in the oxygen like I'd been starved. It was only when I opened my eyes a bit and looked to my left that the panic started to subside.<p>

Lying beside me in the bunk was Willis. He had an arm wrapped around me and I'd been leaning against him as I slept. Slowly I relaxed, remembering where we were and how we'd gotten here. That seemed to make things better for a little while, but the cold feeling of pain and fear and sadness from the nightmare didn't go away.

Willis cracked open a hazel eye at me. "Coop? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I mumbled in reply. "Go back to sleep."

I heard him snort. "Like hell. You just kicked me in the leg right now, and it was pretty damn close to the spot you seemed to like so much a few hours ago. I'm thinking you probably want me to stay injury-free in that area."

Even in light of the dream and despite the fact that I still wasn't completely conscious yet, I couldn't help but grin. "There's plenty of other things I love about you, too. But you're right, that does fall into the top three category."

My husband chuckled. "I kind of figured."

He shifted in bed then and I felt his lips touch my own. I promptly kissed him back, but remembered he needed to take it slow so I pulled back a bit.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good," he answered. "You?"

"Really good. I missed this. It's nice to be able to wake up next to you again."

Willis touched my arms and scooted closer. "I missed this, too."

His kiss felt different this time. It wasn't just the automatic response to waking up together, or a soft peck as a display of affection. It was hard and deep, an invitation. And before I knew it, I found myself getting lost in it again.

"Will? You're sure you're okay?" I asked him between kisses.

He smirked at me in response. "I'm good to go if you are."

And that was all the answer I needed.

\* \* \*

><p>We didn't say anything for a while afterward, content with spending the moment recovering in silence, lying side by side. Eventually Willis moved closer and I snuggled into his side, resting my head on his chest. It felt like a lifetime since we'd been able to have a quiet moment alone together like this.<p>

"How are you feeling now?" I asked him softly.

"Like things are finally starting to get back to normal, at least for us," my husband replied. Then he sighed. "Of course I can't pilot my

bird, and you're back to waking me up bright and early again. What were you dreaming about?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

He pulled back a little to give me a look. "You know what I mean, Coop. In nearly eleven years of marriage, you've never kicked me in your sleep - except for a few times right after we came home from Africa, just before you got pregnant with the twins. Guess what you weren't taking yet."

I stared back at him. "I wasn't taking pills for the nightmares while I was pregnant, either. I was only cleared to start taking them after I gave birth."

"Right. I think your memory's a little fuzzy."

"Oh, really? Are we going to fight about this now? Because I'm telling you the truth. I never - "

Willis surprised me by leaning in to kiss me and grinned. "Relax, honey. That's not what I was trying to say."

"Then what - "

He sighed. "Let me start over, okay? What I meant was, your symptoms seemed to kind of naturally stabilize there for a while, and if you think about it, I'm sure you can probably remember. Something about all those hormones I guess...I don't know."

I finally calmed down and sighed myself. "Your point?"

"My point is that you kicked me awake this morning, and it's something you haven't done for five years. So I know you're not taking the meds anymore."

I frowned. There wasn't much I could do to try to hide it now, and I didn't want to. Not from him. I took a deep breath and spilled.

"That's because I ran out a couple weeks ago, Will. I tried to get more from the Ex, but the doctor aboard ship said they didn't even have any on the manifest. So until we get rotated out, or this mission ends, I don't have any options."

"Shit, Natalie. That's not good."

"Yeah. Tell me about it. I remembered the nightmares being bad, but not like this."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"You were just starting to get better. I didn't want to worry you."

He took a minute to digest that, then ran his hand over my bare shoulder soothingly. "Okay. What was it about? The dream you had."

"Hayden and Lewis this time, on the Highway. It wasn't really that

unusual from when I used to get them, but...something was off."

"How?"

"My brother was in it."

There was a pause. "Mark or Travis?"

"Trav. And I don't even want to think about why he might've been in there."

Willis squeezed me tighter. "Don't, Cooper. Don't go there. Just remember your little brother is alive and well on Qamar, just like mine is here. If you try to decipher things like that, you'll just end up driving yourself crazy. Reality is reality and the dream is just...something else."

"I know, but it was...pretty disturbing."

He kissed the top of my head. "Of course it was. That's why it's a nightmare. I'm sorry you have to go through this again, honey, but hopefully, we're getting close to ending things here on Khan now. Maybe we'll get to go home soon, like you said, and you won't have to go long at all without your meds."

"Yeah. I hope so, too."

My husband had always been good at reassuring me about things, and this time was no different. I finally had him back fully - alive and well and even mobile now - so there wasn't much to complain about on that front. It was everything I could have hoped for, besides him getting his wings back.

But for some reason, now that my body had settled, I couldn't get what I'd seen in the nightmare out of my head. Especially that last image of my brother, standing over me on the highway along with my two dead best friends.

Like Willis, I hoped to hell it didn't mean anything.

#### 40. Chapter 39: Go Time

Author's Note: This was supposed to be a longer chapter, but then it started to feel overstuffed so I cut it down a little. The remainder will appear in the next installment. :P

Enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Thirty-Nine: Go Time<span>\*</p></div>
<div>
<p>When we finally got out of bed some time later, I left for a few minutes to go take a shower in one of the makeshift stalls the engineers had set up close to the barracks. Unlike the sleeping area, these were separated by gender, so my husband and I split up to go get clean. We met back up in my quarters shortly, toweling dry fast so we could start pulling on our uniforms.</p>
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Willis eyed me as he put on his T-shirt and pants. It was a slower process for him, but I was glad to see he was able to manage without incident.

"Are we just getting dressed or are you taking off soon?" he asked, moving on to tug on his socks and boots.

"I'm probably going to need to leave in a little while," I answered. "There's still a hell of a lot to deal with out there on the island. You missed quite a bit while you were recuperating."

"Like what?"

I shook my head. "It'd take me hours to give you the full rundown. The short version is that we found out a couple of the portals down in the ruins were active and that that's where the Prometheans were coming from. Some of the Storm troops, too." I released a sigh as I finished with my clothing, then moved to go sit on the edge of the bed to lace up my boots. "And because of that, I had to blow the place sky high a little over a week ago. Now the ex-Covies are being even bigger pains in the ass than usual and seeking vengeance for wrecking their sacred space or something."

Willis laughed. "Pissing off bloodthirsty alien zealots. All in a day's work, huh?"

"More or less. And sadly I'm the one who has to deal with all of it."

"Comes with the territory, Coop. I'm sure you can handle it."

"Yeah. Sometimes I kind of wish people would stop putting so much faith in me."

My husband frowned. "Why would you say that?"

"Because it's a lot of responsibility, Will, and I don't always feel equipped to do it."

"Yeah, but...it's what you're good at. That's why you have so many people behind you. They believe you can do it."

"Well, I'm giving it my best shot. I guess we'll see."

He walked over to kiss the side of my neck. "Stop. You're doing fine."

I wish that were true, I thought to myself, but didn't say anything. Willis already knew the nightmares were getting bad again. I didn't want to tell him my drinking was becoming a problem, too.

Thankfully, he changed the subject before I could overthink things.

"Do you have time for a quick bite? I'm starving."

I glanced up from my boots and smiled. "Sure. Let's go."

"Okay. But I could use some help with my jacket first. I can button it with one hand but it would take a while." He flashed me a small grin. "Wouldn't want to be out of uniform in front of the lieutenant colonel."

"Nope. I hear she's a real hardass."

\* \* \*

><p>Since we weren't allowed any displays of affection in public, we settled for walking side-by-side towards the chow hall. We each got numerous salutes going through the barracks, until we stopped by one cot with a familiar-looking young man in it.<p>

Willis grinned a little as he snuck up on his sleeping brother and tipped the edge of the cot with his boot. It spilled over and Matthew was startled awake, while my husband just stood there and laughed. That earned him a deep scowl from his younger sibling, although I found my own lips twitching in amusement, too.

"God, Will," Matthew muttered groggily from the ground. "Stop being a dick."

"Oh, come on, little bro. It's funny. The look on your face was priceless."

"Yeah? Yours'll be too when I put my fist through it."

"Hey, hey," I interjected. "Willis just got better. There will be no acts of retaliation for pranks for a while. I mean it." Then I looked over at my husband. "Will, honey, try acting your age for the last few minutes we're here, okay? That way everybody's happy."

Willis nodded and gave me a mock-salute. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Now let's all go eat."

\* \* \*

><p>We were still finishing up breakfast when I felt my datapad buzz in my pocket. Intuiting that this meant it was probably time for me to quickly get up and go, I drained the last of my cup of coffee before I answered.<p>

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper here," I said.

"Colonel, this is Captain Rhodes. Are you still on the mainland?"

Beside me, Willis and Matthew were snickering loudly about something amongst themselves. I elbowed my brother-in-law in the arm and gave Willis a warning look to shut them up. "Yes, sir. Why?"

"Just got your orders in from the admiral. You're clear to accept Laraza's proposal. We need that ship in play."

Not wanting the two brothers to hear me, I got up from the table then and stepped outside the tent. "Really, sir? The UNSC is giving up its post here?"

"Well, you know from experience that the last one didn't fare so well, Cooper. We're assuming the next one won't, either. And with what we're up against out here at the moment, the brass decided it was best to just cut our losses and tag out."

"So we're leaving Khan then, you mean."

"Yes. Just as soon as the alien problems are solved. Beyond that, there's nothing more we can do here - and with the portals neutralized, so is the threat of the Storm or Prometheans returning."

"What about the reconstruction we'd started? The build sites?"

"Up to the locals now. We gave them a shot at a peaceful coexistence and they blew it."

"Right. I understand, sir."

"That makes your job very clear-cut, Colonel. Defeat our enemies on Qamar, and you're done. We're going home."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

I heard the smile in his voice, even if I couldn't see it. "You're welcome, although it didn't come from me. Rhodes out."

When I walked back into the mess, I couldn't quite make sense of my emotions. My initial reaction was to be excited and happy - going home meant leaving behind everything bad that had happened here in the Outer Colony world since our arrival several months ago. It meant seeing my kids, who I'd missed so much every day. It meant Willis would get to complete his recovery in our own house. And it meant I'd get access to my medicine again, so the nightmares would finally stop.

But something struck me as I crossed over the threshold into the large tent. Leaving Khan behind also meant leaving the last place I'd seen my best friend, Major Oliver Hayden, alive. It meant leaving the civilians under the care of a man who ran not just the political side of the city but also the business one, a man who was more than willing to injure and kill and manipulate to get what he wanted. I felt bad for those who'd never taken up arms against us while we'd been here, but got lumped together in that group anyway when we left them with him.

All of these were thoughts I tried to erase from my expression when I returned to the table, but I wasn't a spook. I couldn't just turn things on and off in my head, so I sat down hard next to Willis, not even bothering to finish the last of my food. I'd suddenly lost my appetite.

My husband glanced at me, worried. "Natalie? What happened? Who was that?"

"Captain Rhodes, the Affair's CO," I said. "He said after we're done on the island, we're going home."

\* \* \*

><p>Willis didn't seem to get how the news could possibly upset me. Though he hadn't said anything yet, I could tell it caused a subtle rift between us - like he thought I wasn't interested in going back to Earth. I was, and more than anything I wanted to finally be home with him and our daughter and sons. I wanted this mission to be over. But the situation was a little more complicated than that for me.<p>

As I stood out in the field by the Pelican, dressed in full gear and getting ready to take off along with Matthew and Heat, I watched as he folded his arms across his chest and stared straight ahead.

"So you're leaving, huh? When will you be back?"

"When it's done," I replied, slinging my DMR behind my back and picking up my helmet. "For better or for worse, the endgame's in motion now. Either we get them, or they get us. Simple as that."

"And what if I want to come with you?"

I looked up at him. "Will, you're not cleared to fly yet."

"No, but I'm still a damn good sharpshooter. I'm sure you can use an extra sniper out there."

"One who can pull the trigger, yes. But as long as you're battling buttons, it's a no-go." I walked the few paces separating us and kissed him lightly on the lips. "I'm sorry, honey, but I just don't think you're ready yet. Stay here and rest up. I'll be back before you know it." Then I flashed him a grin, both to bolster my own resolve and for his benefit. "And go take advantage of those nice command quarters I left you."

He smiled back weakly. "Okay. I will."

I hugged him hard then just before I had to get on the bird - not so hard it hurt his ribs, but enough for him to know how much I didn't want to let go. He hugged me back and tipped my chin up with his fingers for a deep kiss.

"Be careful on the island, Coop. Stay safe."

"Of course."

"I love you."

"I love you, too. I'll see you soon."

\* \* \*

><p>The Pelican ride back to Qamar was silent and filled with tension. Afraid to speak in front of Matthew, Heat said nothing the whole time, making it unbearably quiet. I was glad when we finally landed, and the three of us were able to go our separate ways.<p>

As usual, Staff Sergeant Porter and his squad were there at the LZ to greet me.

"Welcome back, ma'am!" Porter shouted above the din.



"Thanks! So what's the skinny?"

"We've been holding off both sides while you were gone, Colonel! But things've really picked up in the last hour! We're getting pressure from the ex-Covies and the Prometheans. It's good you're here!"

"Roger that! Let's get started pushing back!"

I pulled on my helmet then and opened a regiment-wide COM channel to all the Marines. "Marines of the 52nd, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper! I know things are tight so I brought back some help from the mainland. We're going to have two companies of rebels join in the fight to boost our numbers. I'm attaching one to Major Brewer's battalion and the other to Major Harris's. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harris replied.

"Copy that, Colonel," Brewer said.

"Good. Majors, I want separate sitreps on each of your sectors, too. Warfield included. Let's finish this up so we can go home."

"Ma'am? We're not returning to the mainland after this?" my former XO asked.

"Negative, Shawn. We end this here and now and we're done. Cooper out."

Once that was done I started ahead with my aide and his squad, DMR at the ready as we prepared to enter the chaos. I could hear gunfire and explosions coming from everywhere around us, making it clear that neither the Prometheans nor the Remnant were going to make this easy. We'd be home free after this was over, but only if we managed to come out on top - and not only win the battle, but eradicate them both altogether.

Taking in the view before us, I turned to the staff sergeant and said, "Josh, where's our Mantis deployed?"

"I don't know, ma'am. Haven't seen it in a while."

"All right. I'm sure Major Brewer's got a location for me."

I opened up a separate channel then to my new second-in-command. Her answer was prompt.

"Ma'am?"

"Brewer, where's our big bad beast? I don't see it but there's definitely a lot of spots where we could use its firepower."

"We've got it on the far side of the island, Colonel, close to our original LZ," she replied. "I'm not sure why, but it looks like what's left of the Storm's air wing have congregated there. Last I heard from Major Collins, she was busy fighting them off. They're down to low numbers now, but they're tenacious bastards."

I frowned at the news. "What the hell's down there? I know the ruins are gone, but I figured they'd want to protect even the damn crater that place left."

"Maybe they just don't want to get too entangled with the Prometheans' lines, ma'am."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Still, something about this didn't feel right. By all accounts the Remnant should've been more interested in the remains of their holy ground than an area several clicks away. I cut the connection then and looked back to Porter.

"Ma'am? What is it?"

"The ex-Covies are up to something. We need to keep an eye on them. Let's head for the old LZ."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get us a troop 'Hog out here right away."

\* \* \*

><p>In order to get to where we needed to be, we had to pass through some of the worst parts of the fighting. Even gunning it, the ride seemed to take forever as we wove in and out of skirmishes and past large, pluming detonations. If I'd thought coming out here to wrap up the battle was going to be a quick in-and-out job, I couldn't have been more wrong.<p>

"Corporal!" I yelled to the driver beside me as we raced along the ridge. "What's our ETA?"

"Five more minutes, ma'am! We're almost there! Hang - "

The Warthog took a sudden hard right turn to avoid incoming fire, and I used my left hand to keep a firm grip on the overhead bar while keeping my right glued to my gun. When the vehicle finally straightened out again, I let go of the bar and gripped my rifle more securely, letting loose a trio of bursts at the Storm troops as we drove past. It was difficult to hit anything at this speed, but I managed to nail a Jackal looking down its sights at a group of Marines. The bullets ripped through its skull, sending a spray of blood out the back of its head before the angle changed and I couldn't see its body anymore.

\_One less to worry about,\_ I thought.

I was still thinking about the kill when I heard the loud sound of enemy ordnance \_whoosh\_ through the air. Instinctively I started to look up, but in the fraction of a second that I turned my head, it was already too late.

A massive plasma round from one of the Phantoms still circling up above crashed into the sandy dirt just scant meters away from us. We were blown out of the 'Hog in an instant, the vehicle upending and sending all of its passengers sailing across the terrain. I heard the harsh whine of metal as it was boiled away, and then the screams of several nearby Marines as I took flight.

The first time I landed on the ground after the hit wasn't my last. I bounced off the hard dirt with a brutal grunt and went back up again, impacting against the earth a second time a few feet away, then rolling. By the time my momentum finally slowed, my helmet and weapon were gone and I was disoriented - and in a world of pain.

"Fuck," I mumbled. I tried to push myself up off the ground, breathing hard, but my arms wouldn't hold me up. My muscles had taken a beating.

"Holy shit! Colonel!"

The panicked voice was Porter's. If I could have I would have breathed a sigh of relief - I was glad he was okay at least.

"Jesus. Ma'am, are you all right?"

His voice was closer now. I figured he was either crouched beside me or standing over me. I didn't open my eyes yet to see because I felt like I was on a merry-go-round.

"I think I'm...still alive." I tried to move again but winced when I did so. "Shit. My head..."

"Careful, ma'am. Take it slow. You're bleeding a bit."

"I know. But we can't...stay here."

"I'll help you up."

I opened my eyes then and saw the staff sergeant move to do just that, but it seemed the Storm had other plans. A small group of them were converging on us, just as the rest of the Marines in Porter's squad started to rise from the dirt.

"Josh...belay that. We've got...company."

#### 41. Chapter 40: Dent in the Armor

##### **\*\*Chapter Forty: Dent in the Armor\*\***

Although my body protested as I did so, I ran my hand along my side and reached for my pistol, still lying on my stomach on the ground. I wiped the blood off the scratch on my face with my sleeve and brought the gun up, aiming it downrange at the aliens.

"Marines, if you're...up and mobile, open fire!" I barked.

Staff Sergeant Joshua Porter led the defense by stepping slightly in front of me and letting loose a long burst from his SAW, chewing up the first several Grunts who tried to attack. As their bodies fell more took their place, and that left us with the Jackals and single Elite to deal with.

At this range and in my position, my pistol did little to stem the tide. I fired off a succession of half a dozen rounds, each seeming to get more off target than the last. Frustrated, I finally moved to push myself up off the ground again. This time, maybe thanks to adrenaline, I managed better and got up on one knee, giving me a more

suitable vantage point to fire from. Now when I squeezed off a trio of bullets they hit their mark, landing right at the heart of the closest Grunt on approach with the final one grazing the Elite's shield. It bounced off so in lieu of being able to use any more powerful firearms myself, I thumped Porter on the helmet.

"Josh, aim for the Elite! I'll try to tackle the rest!"

The staff sergeant nodded and quickly adjusted his aim, while I tried to do the same. For me it was harder than it looked though, since my body protested everything I did now that I was back on my feet. I felt my head still swirling a little too from the hit-and-tumble, but I was able to overcome it and adjust for it as the skirmish kept on. With only two of us currently able to fight back, I knew this was a life-or-death scenario we were facing. I had to help Porter out until the other Marines recovered enough to jump in.

With that thought in mind, I quickly realized our only hope of stopping the ex-Covies before they reached us and we were overwhelmed was to toss a frag. I took my pistol in my left hand then and grabbed onto a grenade with my right, tugging it off my belt. I pulled the pin and yelled out, "Staff, duck!" and let it fly.

The resulting explosion was close, but when I opened my eyes again to assess the damage, I could see it'd done its job. Two Jackals lay dead in the tan dirt, their blood arranged in an almost circular splatter around them. The blast had also caused the Elite's shield to fail, which was the real plus - now all we had left was him and one last Jackal to take care of.

Bringing my pistol back up, I looked behind us and saw a few of the other Marines were jogging up now, holding their weapons to bear. While Porter continued to lay down the heavy fire, I turned to the closest one and said, "The Elite, Marine! Get 'im!"

With the extra aid the brief skirmish was over in seconds. The Jackal was dispatched fast by a final round from the PFC next to me, and Porter and the others sent the Elite where it belonged - in hell - a moment later. It was only then that I started to really feel the pounding in my head, and a few sharp little stings coming from my face and arms since I had my sleeves rolled up in the heat.

Staff Sergeant Porter came to look me over once the perimeter was clear.

"Ma'am, you've got a small cut on your face and a couple more across your arms. Are you still feeling okay?"

I let out a snort. "Not as good as I normally do, but not bad. I don't think we need to call Doc for this." I glanced behind us. "I just need to find my helmet and rifle after all that. Anybody else hit?"

"Eliot," the PFC beside us, Rigwurst, replied, his voice a little shaky. "Colonel, I don't...I don't think he made it."

Looking back at the 'Hog, several feet away now, I noticed a body slumped in the front seat. Corporal Eliot had been our driver.

"Dammit," I muttered under my breath, starting to head towards him. "Let's go see if he's still alive."

The PFC and I raced over, all while Porter instructed the remainder of his squad to watch over us. When we got there, I pressed my fingers against the corporal's neck first, although it seemed pretty clear to me from seeing his injuries up close that he was a goner. I needed to make sure.

I stood there for a good minute, still breathing hard myself from the sprint and the fight, but concentrating hard on determining if there was a pulse. I watched as the blood oozed down the corporal's dark face from a gash on his shaved head, planted there from a large shard of glass that had broken off the windshield from impact. There was another one in his gut, slowly beginning to coagulate now. I knew even before I let my fingers slip off his carotid artery that there wasn't anything we could do for him. Corporal Eliot was dead.

PFC Rigwurst seemed to get the hint, too, and he quickly touched a hand to his helmet. "Son of a bitch," he murmured. "Goddamn, Ellie. Why'd it have to be you?"

I didn't have to ask if Eliot was his buddy - that much was pretty clear. And I'd lost enough friends myself to know how the PFC was feeling. I leaned over and gripped his shoulder in reassurance.

"I'm sorry, Private. You did what you could, but this isn't something we could've stopped."

Rigwurst gave a snort. "Right. The shitty roulette of war. After this mission's done I'm out, ma'am. No more."

The young Marine walked a few paces away then to collect himself after the death of his friend. I stood there a moment longer wondering just how long it was since the private had joined up, and how much of his contract he still had left. I wondered too why it was that for some people it took just one taste of battle to want out, while many, if not most, of the Marines I'd worked with over the years couldn't even think of another way of life - myself included. It wasn't that this line of work was the best, not with all the horrific scenarios it had to offer, but it was simply what we did and what we knew.

I really realized then that for me, I'd always want to be the one leading my Marines - regardless of the hardships. I just didn't trust anyone else to do it right.

\* \* \*

><p>Shortly after I found my helmet and DMR among the wreckage - thankfully intact - we walked past the group of Storm we'd just killed to continue on our way to the LZ. I decided to take point since my head didn't feel like it was spinning around like a top anymore, and somewhere in the carnage I heard a noise.<p>

It sounded like something that was trying but failing to breathe past the blood in its lungs, and I turned and looked to find that one of the torn up Grunts at my feet wasn't dead. I didn't feel any sympathy for it, not after everything that had happened during the War and even here on Khan, but I figured the safest thing for us to do was

put it out of its misery. I momentarily switched my grip on my DMR to my left hand, pulled out my sidearm with my right, and fired a bullet into its head, silencing the gurgling gasps.

Staff Sergeant Porter jogged up beside me then, glancing down at the dead Grunt I'd just shot. "Ma'am? Where to next?"

"Same stop as before, Staff. Let's head over - and we'll try not to get blown up this time."

\* \* \*

><p>Just like everyone had been telling me lately, the old LZ was a mess as we approached. Since our group was small we managed to more or less stay below the radar amid the chaos, but there was so much going on up above and on the ground that it was difficult to negotiate the safest route in. After contacting the nearest Marine commander we were able to get an escort into the heart of the lines, getting us out of the main action as much as we could. There, I found one of Major Brewer's subordinates speaking with an agitated woman - Doctor Jill Leedom.<p>

"Ma'am, please, as I've said before: the location you're trying to reach isn't safe, and my CO hasn't allowed us any detachment to -"

"Lieutenant, do you even understand what we're doing here? I need to get to that cave on the beach. Now!"

The young Marine officer attempting to converse with the head scientist, First Lieutenant Houston Frye, looked relieved as ever to see me. "Oh, good. Colonel, I'm glad you're here. We're having some...difficulties defusing the situation with the doctor."

"What's happening now?" I asked, slinging my DMR behind my back as I looked from the scientist to the lieutenant. "And why do we have the whole damn Remnant army on top of us over here?"

Lieutenant Frye opened his mouth to answer, but it was Leedom who replied.

"I believe I know the answer to that question, Colonel. Your subordinate is being greatly unhelpful in allowing me to test that theory, however. Even though in many ways, it could be more important than what we discovered in the ruins."

I snorted. "I kind of doubt that, but I'm willing to throw you a bone. What do you think's here?"

Doctor Leedom fixed her gaze squarely on me as she spoke. "You remember when you ordered the ruins to be detonated? Without us ever having been able to finish investigating the new portal we'd found?"

I could tell Leedom was keeping the details scarce in front of the lieutenant - most of what we'd spoken of in the underground chamber was highly classified. "Yes."

"It's related to that. And I'd like to show you what I mean. It could be the key to why the Storm are suddenly so interested in this

area."

I thought it over for a moment. I knew from experience that with Leedom, and with my own mother, that once they got an idea in their head, it was hard to dissuade them that it could be wrong, or wasn't worth the sacrifice to test. Scientists like them simply had to know for themselves. And in this case, I felt it might be to our great detriment not to go take a look. Obviously, the Storm were here for something - and I was just as curious to find out for what.

"Okay," I said. "You'll get me and my security detail, Doctor. Everyone else is busy trying to keep the damn aliens from landing on our heads and overwhelming us. You've got thirty minutes to show us what you have." I looked at the Marine next. "Lieutenant, now that we've got this settled, you return to the lines. We need as many troops out there as we can to hold them off."

"Yes, ma'am."

\* \* \*

><p>As I followed Doctor Leedom to where she thought she needed to be, with Porter's squad in tow, I kept my sidearm in hand in case we ran into anything unexpected. We should've been pretty safe here, but relying on a weapon was always better than relying on what you thought should occur. Things never quite seemed to work out as planned, so I wanted to be ready for whatever we got thrown at us.<p>

"So what is it exactly that we're looking for?" I questioned after a while.

"I wanted to tell you sooner, Cooper, but the presence of the lieutenant made it tricky," she replied. "The Storms' sudden interest in the opposite end of the island made me think. I no longer believe the tunnel to the Earth portal we found beneath the ruins was the only route in, Colonel."

"Oh. Shit."

That would definitely explain a lot. And we knew from when we'd first found the main chamber itself that there was at least one other tunnel from the beach that led there. Maybe there was another that we'd missed.

"By my calculations on the Storms' inbound trajectories and the main focus of their assault, I believe I've gotten a close approximation of where the entrance should be."

"Somewhere along the shore, I'm guessing?"

"Precisely," the head scientist responded. She gave me a look. "I can see the family resemblance in you. You get your smarts from your mother."

I snorted a second time. "Maybe. My dad wasn't a tool, either. He was in command of his own ship when he died. Saved most of his crew with his sacrifice." My voice went a little low then. "I just wish his heroics hadn't cost the rest of us so damn much."

"Is that why it bothers you as deeply as it does?" Leedom asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You're always acutely aware of what your decisions will mean when you make them - not just for those directly involved, but for you, and for those around you. Is it because of what happened to your parents? It sounds to me like you found their deaths too high a price to pay."

I frowned as I walked. Now wasn't exactly the time I wanted some scientist going through my head like a shrink. I shut down that line of conversation quickly. "Damned if I know, Doc. I don't have a PhD in anything. Let's just get to beach and see if what you say is true."

Though it was difficult to get there from the cliffside, we reached the beach about fifteen minutes later. Down here I was taking no chances - I holstered my pistol and brought my DMR to bear again.

"Josh, check the area and form a perimeter," I ordered. "No telling what we could've missed."

Leedom and I stayed put until I received the signal that the coast was clear. I nodded and started to move ahead once more, with my aide and his Marines and the scientist following behind.

Being back on the beach felt strange. I couldn't hear much besides the waves crashing on the shore close by, so I kept my eyes peeled more than usual, relying on my vision to alert me to trouble since my hearing, for the most part, was out.

"So where did your calculations take us, ma'am?" I asked Leedom.

She pointed up ahead. "There, about forty yards from here. We should see some sort of cave or tunnel entrance."

I followed her instructions and moved forward, stepping carefully through the wet sand, but not slowly. I could feel the tiny rock particles giving way under my boots, a stark contrast to the packed sandy dirt on the ridge. It made it difficult to maintain sure footing.

When we finally reached the spot Leedom had indicated, I paused and glanced up - only to find more of the same sheer cliff face. I looked back at the doctor.

"Well, it's not here, but it's possible your aim was off a bit," I said. "Want to take a look around?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sure it's here somewhere. I know it."

While Porter's squad kept up the perimeter as before, I tagged along with Leedom, pulling security and helping her in her search at the same time. By the time we finally spotted the small crevice, we'd been looking around for ten minutes.



I think we'd been expecting a large, obvious tunnel entrance like before. This was more like a jagged crack in the rockwall. Doctor Leedom approached it with confidence and tapped at it, leaning in to peek through.

"It's here, Colonel," she announced then. "I'm sure of it."

"They'll have to invent some really small ex-Covies and people to get through, though..."

I stepped off to the side and opened up a private COM channel to my brother. I knew exactly what was needed here.

"Natalie?"

"Hey, Trav. If you're not busy, I need you for a project. How soon can you get your demo team to this location?"

"Six, maybe eight minutes."

"All right, do it. I think we may have found something pretty big here, but we won't know until we can get inside. And let's just say the door isn't too...size-friendly."

Travis chuckled. "So basically what you're saying is, you need me to blast a hole to get you guys in."

"Yup."

"Okay. We'll be right there."

"And Travis?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful. There's been a shit-ton of activity in our sector up there."

"I know. Don't worry, sis."

\_I always worry,\_ I thought to myself as I cut the connection. \_I have to. Look at all the shit that's happened...and what we're up against now.\_ Instead of voicing it, though, I tried to push the thought away and returned to business.

"Ma'am, I'm sending my demolition team over now," I imparted to Leedom. "Today's your lucky day - you get to meet yet another Cooper."

\* \* \*

><p>Travis arrived faster than I'd thought he would, which was good since it meant we didn't have to stand around waiting too long while Marines fought, bled, and died up above us. I was itching to get back into the fray where I felt I belonged, but knew that for now I was needed here and that this was just as important - maybe even more so. If Doctor Leedom was right and this really was another way into the tunnel that led to the portal to Earth, we needed it shut down yesterday.<p>

As he approached with his team, my brother nodded to me first, then glanced at Leedom. "Ma'am, I'm Captain Travis Cooper. We'll be opening this baby up for you this morning. I'm sure you've met my older sister the supreme ground commander already."

Doctor Leedom smiled. "Travis Cooper. It's very good to meet you."

"She says she knew Mom," I explained to him. "I guess they worked together on some projects a while back."

"That we did," Leedom said. "She was very proud of her baby boy."

Travis's face went red. "Well, not a baby so much anymore, ma'am. And it's hard to be proud when you're dead." He shifted his focus to directing his Marines with gestures then, but kept up the conversation. "I'm not as put-together as my big brother Mark, not as venerated as my late older sister Jenna, and not as accomplished as my sister Nat here...but I'm a year older than our little sister Allison, and I pack a mean punch. Just ask the enemy." He grinned. "By tank, by rocket, by giant bomb, you name it. If it's got a big gun or a big explosion attached, you can bet that was me."

"He's also very theatrical," I added dryly. "Trav, just rig the break for us, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Already on it."

We continued keeping watch until my younger brother signaled that everything was in place. All of us retreated to a safe distance for the detonation, then waited for the debris cloud to dissipate a bit until we could return to where we thought the tunnel would be.

Sure enough, Leedom had been right.

"Shit," I breathed. "Here it is."

"Still believe science has little to offer us, Colonel?" the doctor said. "We should move in now, quickly. The blast won't go unnoticed."

"Right. No argument there. Travis, you get your guys to watch the entrance. Porter, you're with me. Let's move."

"Yes, ma'am."

I had the staff sergeant venture in first this time, followed by me, Leedom, and then the rest of his squad. I was surprised at how similar this place looked to the tunnel to the underground chamber we'd found on the beach several weeks back, when we'd first landed on Qamar. There were automatic lights installed in this one as well, although the first few were blown out and non-functional thanks to the explosion. They came on suddenly further down the passageway, startling us at first.

"Don't get too jumpy," I said over the COM. "They're just auto-lights. Keep moving forward."

Acknowledgment lights winked green and we continued on. The tunnel

seemed to get colder the further we went in, but at the same time, somehow the compactness made me think maybe this wasn't as long as the other one had been. It certainly didn't extend all the way to the opposite end of the island. It wasn't long before we wound our way around a corner and the passage opened up into a room.

"This is it," Doctor Leedom told us. "The tunnel ends here. We've made it."

I looked around as the remainder of Porter's squad filed in with us, expanding out across the room to cover all possible angles. I held my rifle raised too as I took in the sights - it was like a much smaller version of the large chamber beneath the ruins. Circular, with no other obvious points of entry. Of course somewhere there used to be one, but it was covered beneath several layers of rubble now.

When we'd determined that there was no immediate threat, I pointed to cave walls and turned to the head scientist. "Doctor, this is your area of expertise now. Do we even know for sure this portal's still active?"

"Yes. My team and I checked ourselves before the other entrance was blown. Do you see the symbols on the walls? They're glowing."

I noticed it now, though it was hard to tell with the overhead lights on. I suddenly grew more determined to see this through.

"Okay. Looks like it's here then, right where you said. You know what that means, ma'am. I need to get rid of this tunnel, too."

"No!" Leedom exclaimed. "There must be another way. Please, Colonel. Give us just one day to explore. We can't even know what we might find - "

"I know what we won't find if I get this thing demolished - hundreds of dead Marines, and possibly even civilians. I can't allow something like this to stay here, Doctor, knowing how many ex-Covenant are out there clamoring to get inside so they can take a quick trip to Earth. And let's not forget the Prometheans, either. You know if they get wind of this, they could stage a whole planet-wide invasion."

As if the human homeworld hadn't been through enough already, what with the Covenant and Flood tearing it apart during the War. No, I didn't at all feel inclined to put Earth, the place where Willis and I had raised our kids the last few years, in harm's way like that. When all this was over, I was hoping to return to my family in our own house - not see it go up in flames along with everything else again.

I started to walk out when Leedom halted right in front of me, blocking my way.

"Colonel, what can I do to convince you that taking just a cursory glance around this place is worth it?"

"I'm not sure you can, Doc. I've lost a lot of people over the years on hedged bets. I won't do the same with my men."

The head scientist went quiet then. "This isn't about your parents at

all, is it? It's about your child. The one you lost."

"What?"

"I read your file, Colonel. I know you suffered a miscarriage late into the war. The commanders at the base where you were stationed put the post in danger for a shot at gaining more knowledge on the Flood...and you lost your baby when the Covenant nearby subsequently attacked. If ever you'd feel the ends didn't justify the means -  
"

I'd had enough of her manipulation now. And her mention of my loss was more than I could take. I stepped up closer with fury in my eyes, a warning. "Don't. Don't you ever use that against me again. I'm here to look out for my Marines and for the people of this planet - and the people of Earth. I'll always do what's best for them. This is not worth the risk."

"Cooper, no matter your loss, you know that sometimes that simply isn't true. What your mother discovered about the Flood...all of it is what helped us defeat them five years ago. Without that, we might still be fighting them today. Or worse."

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that. But I wasn't in a place to be able to acknowledge it at the moment. I brushed roughly past the scientist and headed out of the chamber, my aide and his Marines in tow.

When I got outside, I pulled Travis aside immediately and said, "Trav, I need you to go rig the chamber in there. Now. If the doctor argues, you tell me and I'll get an armed guard to escort her out."

My little brother gave me a look. "Nat, what - "

"I said now, Captain. I'm tired of getting my orders questioned. Just do it!"

"All right, all right! Calm down. I'm on it."

While he got to work, I took in a deep, steadying breath, then used my datapad to make a call to the mainland.

"Yes? This is Javier Laraza speaking."

"Laraza, it's Cooper. You know that ship we were talking about last night?"

"Yes, Colonel. You have need of it?"

"The brass has approved your proposal. I just got word a few hours ago. We need you to bring that ship in ASAP. I'm ready to get this thing done."

I practically heard the smirk in his voice. "Very well. I'll tell my men to get it into position. Notify your naval commander that we are about to begin."

## **\*\*Chapter Forty-One: Reckoning, Part One\*\***

After speaking briefly with Laraza and updating Captain Rhodes on the Excalibur, I stood waiting for Doctor Leedom to exit the blown-out tunnel on the beach. By now I was itching to get back up top - not only to help in the fight, but because I knew it was only a matter of time until the Remnant zeroed in on the explosion. I also wanted her out because Travis and his demo team were all set to go inside to rig the room, and I wanted her gone before the charges started getting placed.

I watched from close to the shoreline, never turning my back on the ocean waves as my dad had taught me when I was three, but at an angle so I could still watch for any signs of trouble from the flanks or above us. My DMR was slung behind my back for the moment, but I kept my right hand on the grip of my holstered sidearm, ready for whatever came.

What approached shortly though wasn't anything to fear - it was my brother, walking over slowly but purposefully. Now that I was calmer, I sucked in a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, feeling like a sack of shit for how I'd snapped at him. Especially since the intense hurt I'd felt when I'd dreamed about him amongst my dead friends back on the mainland this morning was still fresh in my mind.

"Travis? What's wrong?" I asked him, anticipating a problem. "Is the ordnance good?"

"Yeah, it's all good. I just came over to see if you were doing okay. You look...I don't know. A little distraught."

"More like preoccupied," I answered. "I have a lot going on in my head right now."

"I bet. Running the whole show can't be easy."

"It's not, but it's my job." I pinched at the bridge of my nose and added, "Listen. I wanted to say I'm sorry about earlier. Leedom said something about the baby and I lost my head."

Travis's face went from impassive to angry in an instant. "That bitch."

"I know. I'm glad you said it and not me. It wouldn't be very becoming of my position."

"Screw that. She's the one going after you at the lowest possible level." My younger brother fumed for another minute but then suddenly smirked at me and asked, "Want me to go punch her in the face for you?"

I chuckled. "No, thanks. I've got it handled. If you really want to do me a favor though, just make sure that portal's good to go in a timely fashion once she's out."

"Of course, Nat. I'll get it done."

He turned to leave then, but I called out his name to stop him.

"Hey, Trav?"

He spun around and said, "Yeah? What?"

"I love you, little brother. Stay safe."

This time when he smiled, it was genuine. "Love you too, big sis. I hope you try not to get into anymore scrapes, too."

And with that he was gone.

\* \* \*

><p>With the lead scientist out of the way and the prep work on detonating the portal started, I was able to finally leave the beach along with Porter's squad. Up top things hadn't gotten any better - in fact, they were only getting worse.<p>

It seemed like the ex-Covies were really moving in now. Since we'd returned from the tunnel entrance, their numbers had increased by at least twofold. I wondered for a minute if the explosion had been like a beacon for them, but I also knew that their knowledge of the portal's presence alone was a big motivator. The Storm most certainly had other ways to get to Earth if they really wanted to, but this was by far the simplest, fastest, and most direct route. I was glad that we were now shutting down that avenue for them.

I ducked my head along with Porter and everyone else as a sudden blast from above rocked the dirt. I couldn't immediately tell if it had originated from one of the Phantoms continuing to harass the area, or if the ordnance came from the Remnant ship that had reappeared above us now in orbit. I supposed in the end there wasn't much of a difference; both posed a serious threat to us ground troops, and both needed to be taken out as soon as possible.

The best way to do that was to start getting the defense and counterattack rolling planetside. As soon as the debris from the blast cleared the area, I straightened up and gripped my DMR tighter in my hands, quickly opening a regiment-wide channel. "Marines, this is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper! We need to tighten up the lines before the Storm break through! Machine gunners, I want you front and center, right now! Heavy weapons, try to keep the upstairs traffic alert! Major Collins and the rest of the wings up there could use the help. Everyone else, do what you can to bolster those flanks! We cannot let the Remnant penetrate the perimeter, is that understood?"

Acknowledgment lights flashed across my HUD, and I suddenly felt a rush - like we just might be able to pull this off. "All right. Semper fi, Marines! Let's work our magic so we can go home."

"Oorah!"

I cut the line to the chorus of voices and felt ready to take on the world. Unfortunately, the pumped feeling didn't last long - only a few minutes later, our own side of the lines started to see increased foot traffic. And it was the worst possible kind. While my aide's squad and I opened fire right away, I noticed that some of the

Marines closest to us froze. Up ahead, a line of Grunts came running for all of us, as they had when we'd first landed on the island - with glowing blue plasma grenades in each hand.

As I rattled off a flurry of tight bursts from my rifle, I opened up the COM again and yelled, "Sharpshooters, aim for the explosives! Make sure they all go up before they reach us! The rest of you, just target the bastards, \_now\_!"

Finally Brewer's Marines started getting involved too, bringing down Grunt after Grunt and eliminating several from their lines when either a fallen alien's 'nade exploded beside the rest, or a bullet hit one of the explosives head-on, causing a chain reaction. For my own part I targeted mostly the bodies, adjusting my scope to hit either the torso or gut, but on one of my shots I just got damn lucky. The trio of rounds I fired from my DMR had just the right trajectory at the right moment and I ended up tagging one of the plasma grenades myself. I had to say, it was pretty damn satisfying to see three Grunts go up in smoke along with it, plus a fourth pal who was injured in the blast. I put the little fucker out of his misery quick with another trigger pull, then ducked out for a moment to reload.

The sounds of tens of weapons going off simultaneously didn't stop when I turned back to the fight. They had diminished, though, and now I knew why - as I looked out at the expanse of hard, packed dirt and sand of the ridge, I saw that all the Grunts who'd been gunning for us now were dead.

And close by but further ahead, there were three Marine bodies lying beside fragments of the Grunt who'd made it the farthest forward before its death. Or at least, what was left of the Marines. The ground there was soaked in red blood like a pool, almost overtaking the smaller puddle of sky blue next to it. As always, the sight hit me first...and then there was the smell.

It took everything I had not to let my breakfast from earlier fly - that was something I was determined not to do in front of my men. But any enthusiasm I'd had just a few minutes ago, the adrenaline rush, all of it was gone at seeing the complete bloodbath before me. Further behind the mess of the dead Grunt and three dead Marines were just rows and rows of Grunt bodies, guts, and more blood.

Carnage like this wasn't new to me in the least, and all around us, the battle continued to rage - but once again, like I had many times before in countless scenes like this, I felt some small part inside of me die. None of these were things that were supposed to happen, or things that you were supposed to see. But for us, it was almost the norm. And right now, I sincerely wished it wasn't.

I looked away then before I lost myself to the moment. I couldn't afford a lapse right now, and neither could the other fifteen hundred Marines under my command. They were counting on me not to let them down, to lead them the right way so we could see this through. Together.

And as long as I was still alive and breathing, I always would.

\* \* \*

><p>It wasn't too much later that the fighting on the ground started to take a backseat to what was going on up above us. There wasn't much we could see from here, but Captain Rhodes had just messaged me to let me know Laraza's stealth ship had indeed shown up and the mission to destroy the Storm ship was a go. With the naval battle about to begin, that left it up to me to make sure things here on the ground stayed on course.<p>

Moving forward now with Staff Sergeant Porter and the rest of my security detail, I opened up a COM channel to our air wing commander, Major Erin Collins. "Flight Leader, this is Ground Actual," I said. "We haven't seen too much craziness down here the past few minutes. What's the situation with those Phantoms?"

The response was quicker than I would have thought, which was a nice change of pace. "Phantoms have been eliminated, ma'am. There weren't that many left to start with, but they were vicious as hell. We finally managed to beat them back, and now without support from their ship, they're goners. Nothing but bits and pieces on the ground now."

I found myself actually smiling a little at the news. "Excellent work, Major. That's good to hear."

"Any new orders for us, ma'am?"

"Just be sure to have our backs. Be careful where you fire though - we're starting to all get kind of clumped now. Go for the big open spaces where you see the Remnant or Prometheans and have at it. I'll try to get my battalion commanders to paint some targets for you, too. God knows there's still plenty of aliens on both sides to go around."

"Not over yet, huh, Colonel?"

"Nope. Not by a longshot, Collins. But we'll keep at it."

"Yes, ma'am," she replied. "And just to let you know, we really miss having Major Hawk up here. I'm sure with his help we would have thinned out the bastards in the air a lot sooner."

I smirked a bit. "I'm sure you probably would have. For now, though, he's still recuperating on the mainland. Doctor's orders."

"Something tells me those are wife's orders, too. But I'm just happy to know the major's up and mobile, Colonel. That's a very good sign, especially after what he endured."

"Yeah, it is," I responded somberly. "Good luck, Major. Cooper out."

Next I got on the radio to both Brewer and Harris, making sure that they were holding their sectors down well and checking in on how they were faring. My former XO imparted to me that he was pretty busy keeping the Prometheans occupied by the blown-up ruins, while my current second-in-command was on the opposite flank of my position on the ridge, fighting the Storm. Caught in the middle was Major Warfield, presumably fighting both, and I hailed him now.



"Major, let's have your sitrep. How're things progressing in your area?"

When he finally responded, I could hear heavy gunfire in the background. "We're holding them off, but barely! We've got Prometheans on our ass and Storm troops trying to take us head-on!"

"All right, Cole. Take your Marines and press forward, as hard and fast as you can. Leave the Prometheans to Harris; he'll handle it, and I'll send them over our air support to compensate. Right now, we need our heaviest load here against the Remnant. That way you and Brewer can focus on keeping the alien bastards at bay. Major Collins has freed up her birds in the air so that should give Shawn a considerable advantage even with the 904th's withdrawal."

Instead of acknowledging the command, Warfield immediately snorted and said flatly, "No."

"What was that?"

"I said no, Colonel. Right now the 904th's acting as a buffer, for you and for Harris. If I push my Marines forward you'll both get crowded out. I won't do it."

I tried to keep my temper in check in light of what I was hearing, and attempted to go for reason. "Cole, I'm ordering you to do it. It's not a suggestion, and certainly not a discussion. This is what I want from you, right now."

"And I refuse."

"Yeah? Then you're refusing a direct order. You're sure you want to go that route, Major?"

"What you're proposing won't work! I know that for a fact. So yes, Colonel, I do refuse, in the interest of my battalion as well as the remainder of the regiment."

Honestly, I was floored. Warfield had been a pain in the ass to deal with from the start, but refusing a direct order...I never thought he'd do it. Now he had though, and so he left me with no choice. Obviously he didn't trust my judgment, didn't think I'd do the right thing for my men - and now, he'd proven to me that I couldn't trust him to carry out my commands. It didn't matter that he had no knowledge of the portal to Earth we'd found. The fact that he refused alone, that he still thought I had no clue what I was doing, that I wasn't protecting something vitally important or making changes in my Marines' best interests, was enough.

I sighed and said evenly, "Duly noted, Major. In case you were wondering, that was your very last strike. For refusing an order, and a number of other infractions I can and will list in my report of this since I took charge as lieutenant colonel, I'm stripping you of command of the 904th Infantry and demoting you to captain. We'll get the official paperwork straightened out later, but as of now, you're the XO of the battalion - not CO."

The sudden silence on the other end was palpable. I could almost feel his anger from here, but I was just as mad. And I was tired of

dealing with a man who thought he could do better when he'd only just gotten a small taste of a fraction of the responsibility I held.

"You...you can't do that," he said in an almost-whisper.

"I definitely can, and I just did," I retorted plainly. "You're a good field officer, but I will not tolerate gross insubordination from any of my commanders - at any level. It's obvious the job you were given is not one you were prepared to handle, so now you no longer have it. Do I make myself clear?"

The former major exploded into a fierce tirade then, none of which I had the time nor patience to hear at the moment. I cut him off with a curt, "That is all, Captain Warfield," and opened a channel instead to his former XO - now CO of the 904th. "Captain Mullen? This is Lieutenant Colonel Cooper."

"Ma'am?"

"Congratulations, \_Major\_. You're now in charge of the 904th Infantry Battalion."

"Uh, wow. I mean, yes, ma'am. What about Major Warfield, though?"

"\_Captain\_ Warfield has been demoted, for gross insubordination. Apparently he couldn't handle the rank and found it very difficult to take orders from his superiors. I know you're young, and it's a lot of responsibility, but I'm counting on you to be different, Mullen. You're more than capable. Make us proud."

"I will, Colonel. Thank you."

"And Wayne?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Your first order of business will be to do what Warfield couldn't. Push your men forward through the Remnant's lines. We've got something down on the beach that's very precious that we need to protect. We could use the help."

"Yes, ma'am," the newly promoted Major Wayne Mullen said. "Right away."

## 43. Chapter 42: Reckoning 2

### \*\*Chapter Forty-Two: Reckoning, Part Two\*\*

My brother had said he hoped I didn't find myself in anymore tough scrapes, but as the battle raged throughout Qamar Island, that was hard to do.

Bullets and plasma and needle rounds filled the air as Major Mullen, the 904th's newly minted commander, charged his way through the gaps and fought the pockets of Storm troops hard to get to our outer perimeter. I watched part of it through the tactical view on my datapad, where Mullen's battalion was reduced to an amorphous blob

moving across a physical map of the terrain. I didn't linger on the real-time image though; it was a quick check to see how they were progressing, and then I diverted my attention back to the immediate area.

"Marines, keep up the fire! Plug those holes up in the lines and push back!"

Things were starting to get dicey now. It'd been a while and Travis still hadn't reported in about the charges being ready, and the Storm were being fierce as ever as we continued to cut down their numbers. They were getting cornered now and they knew it, but rather than succumb to the enemy, they were fighting us tooth and nail for every inch. Exactly how we would have if the tables were turned.

I opened fire myself on the closest approaching group then, helping my Marines slaughter a squad of them before they entered our lines. Racing past their fallen comrades, the rest of the Remnant kept right on coming, irrespective of the thick hail of lead aimed in their direction. I heard a couple of shotgun blasts beside me and turned to see a gutted Elite, dripping dark violet blood from a huge hole in its armor and abdomen, let out a gurgling groan as it fell to its knees. A final blast to the head obliterated his helmet and left very little else above the neck, splattering me and another Marine closest to the bastard with its gore.

The Marine who'd killed the Elite, one of Porter's men, turned to me as soon as the alien was down, breathing hard. "Sorry, Colonel."

I shook my head. "Don't be. Better him than us, and better to be dirty than dead."

The fighting went on at a frenetic and unforgiving pace. As soon as I wiped the Elite's thick blood from my helmet visor, a fresh new wave was already moving in, momentarily deterred by a few frag grenades that were chucked into the chaos. I ducked my head as they exploded, sending more sharp cries and bodies upward. The Storm fought back though, and in the midst of mass melee, plasma grenades were tossed at us this time.

I saw one hit the ground just a few feet away and I shoved the Marine who'd killed the Elite sideways as I shouted, "Grenade! \_Move!\_"

I didn't take the time to think about what that choice would mean for me. It'd been a split-second reaction, all instinct, and then I was left with the image of a glowing blue enemy grenade pulsing near me while I was well within the blast zone. Any attempt to move now wouldn't get me out of the way in time, so instead I shut my eyes tight as I listened to the roaring in my ears, hoping Willis would forgive me for not looking out for myself when he learned I was dead.

That's when I heard the guttural growl come from my left.

It wasn't an Elite or a Grunt or anything nonhuman that made it. I risked opening my eyes and went into a moment of shock when I saw that it was my aide, Staff Sergeant Porter, who'd just leapt in from the side and onto the grenade, trying to save me.

"Josh, \_no!\_" I screamed.

But it was too late. The plasma grenade burst beneath his body then, tearing him apart right in front of me. The remainder of the detonation blew me back on my ass a few feet away, dazed and disoriented, but alive. It all happened so fast I wasn't even really sure of what I'd seen, other than the fact that a man I'd worked with and fought beside for over five years now had just gone up in a million pieces for me.

When the dust finally settled I felt like I couldn't breathe. I was still lying flat on my back, my lungs filled with the tiny debris particles in the air, eyes open now but I couldn't seem to focus on anything specific. Various aches wracked my body, especially where I'd landed, but I couldn't hear anything of what was going on around me.

Suddenly another Marine's face appeared in field of vision; he looked like he was yelling something, but I couldn't tell what. I just sank my head back down to the ground and that's when the lights went out.

\* \* \*

><p>When I came to, the first thing I registered was the sound of gunfire - very close by. In that second between being knocked out and full consciousness, I didn't remember yet what had happened to Porter. I opened my eyes a moment later and looked up to see Doc Reynolds crouched beside me. I was glad I could hear again when he glanced at me and spoke.<p>

"Colonel. Welcome back."

"D-Doc?"

"Yes, ma'am. Somebody has to look out for you out here. You tend to be very bad at doing that yourself."

I almost snorted, but then the memory hit me all in a rush and I sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh, God. Josh..."

The medic's voice fell considerably. "Yeah. This time it wasn't me who saved your life. Wouldn't have been able to if that grenade had gone off next to you, as it should have. The staff sergeant took it for you, ma'am. I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to say. I just swallowed hard as the emotions welled up inside me, but I knew I was in no place right now to show it. I lifted my arm to run my rolled-up sleeve across my eyes, but then thought better of it when I saw all the dried blood all over it - not Porter's, but the Elite's from earlier. I let it fall back to the side and used the collar of my T-shirt beneath my battledress jacket instead.

"Fuck, Michael," I rasped out. "I really thought...these days were behind me now. I'm...sick as shit of losing people."

"Same, ma'am. It's why I left the Corps after the War. Only came back on since I knew you'd probably need my help." He gripped my shoulder and squeezed it. "You know you can't bring the kid back. He's gone now, Colonel, for good. But you can make his sacrifice worthwhile by

staying alive, and finishing up this fight."

"R-right."

"Just please, try to take it easy. Being that close to a grenade going off, even one that's covered, is not something your body can just bounce back from right away. I know you have your job to do but...I'd hate to lose another member of the old Bravo Company today."

I winced a little as I slowly sat up. "We're a dying breed, aren't we, Doc?"

"Just me and you now, ma'am. Let's hope it stays that way."

\* \* \*

><p>In the half-hour I'd been out, a lot of things had changed. For one, my security detail was now being headed by Porter's second, Sergeant Derek Lynch. He had jet-black hair cut short and warm brown eyes, and was about the same age I'd been at the tail end of the war. He had a young son he spoke incessantly about, but other than that he kept his personal life private and made it clear that he was here to do his job and nothing else. His no-nonsense attitude was different from Porter's, who'd known me for a long time and knew what I was comfortable with tolerating and what I wasn't when it came to lighter moments. But Lynch was solid, and I knew he was as loyal as his predecessor - even if his demeanor didn't draw attention to it.<p>

"Ma'am, I'm sorry about the staff," he said to me as I approached. "He was a good leader and an honorable Marine. And he died doing what any one of us would do for you in a heartbeat, Colonel."

I gave him a look. "I hope it's a duty none of you have to discharge again. If I could have stopped him, I would." I let out a sigh then as the fighting raged on around us as if nothing earth-shattering had occurred, even though it had for us. But now that I was up and mobile, it was time to get back to it. "Care to bring me up to speed, Lynch?"

"Yes, ma'am. We're finally breaking down the Remnant offensive. Major Mullen's battalion broke through about ten minutes ago, and since then, things've loosened up. We've got more room to maneuver and less of those alien bastards filling the void their dead comrades are leaving."

"That's very good news. Any word from our demo team yet down on the beach?"

"No, ma'am. I find that strange, too. The captain should have reported in by now."

"Okay. I'll look into it."

I stepped off to the side then to open a COM channel to my younger brother. "Travis, it's me. What's the hold up? We haven't heard anything in a while."

"Sorry, Nat. This cave thing is proving a lot tougher to rig than

that big chamber on the other side."

"How so?"

"The proximity to the ocean isn't doing the fuses any favors. We've compensated for that, but it's taking a little longer to put together."

"All right. Well, we're busting ass out here to stop the alien army, so anything you can do to speed things up..."

"Be quick about it. I got it."

"Yup. Cooper out."

Once the connection was closed, I clicked the radio again to check in on Major Harris this time. "Shawn, it's Cooper. You guys still holding your own okay?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's been a tough fight since the 904th pulled out, but I think we got it handled. Collins is doing wonders for us with the air support and the tanker we've got here is providing good backup. Surprisingly, so's that rebel company you sent us. The Prometheans won't leave our lines anytime soon."

"Good to know. We've got our own bag of problems here on the opposite end. Just keep me updated."

"I will, Colonel."

With that done, I was finally able to return my focus to our own battle. It was difficult to get my head back in the game with the knowledge that my trusted aide was gone forever, that he'd died for me - but for now, with all the lives counting on me to see this through, I had no choice but to push it all back to the recesses of my mind and ensure I gave every ounce of my attention to what was happening. The remainder of my Marines deserved no less, and there would be time to digest the loss and mourn the heroic staff sergeant later. For now, like Reynolds had said, the best thing I could do to preserve his memory was to give this fight everything I had.

My own gun joined the chorus of others as we fought to beat back the Storm - just as above us, Captain Rhodes and Laraza's rebel stealth ship did the same. I hadn't received an update on the naval battle in a while, but I was sure the combat was all-out up there in space as well. There was nothing less the UNSC would do when there was a planet at stake.

Just a few minutes later, I found it was already time to reload. We were all burning through ammo fast, so it was a good thing I'd been able to coordinate a steady delivery of supplies from the mainland throughout the fight with Major Collins's help. When I turned back around, I noticed that some of our own members of the rebel detachment we'd been sent were fighting beside me. Not at me like they had when we first landed on Khan, but with us, against the Remnant. It was heartening to see, as it had been when we'd teamed up on the mainland to beat back the ex-Covies, and it gave me a sudden surge of adrenaline and hope again.

"Marines, let's go! Pick it up, and don't stop firing! We can do

this!"

The moment didn't last long, though, as the tables soon turned on us yet again. All of a sudden, a couple of Promethean Knights started teleporting into our lines, entirely unexpectedly - then a handful, and then a dozen.

"Shit, where the fuck did these guys come from?" one of Porter's men shouted. I'd always think of them as his squad, even though now Sergeant Lynch was in charge.

"Don't know, Corporal! Just shoot 'em!" I yelled back.

If I'd thought things were a veritable mess before, it hadn't been anything like this. Soon some of the ex-Covies turned away from fighting us to go up against the Promethean troops now steadily populating the openings, all while us Marines and the rebels shifted our focus from one alien baddie to the robotic one and back again. In short order we were on the verge of getting overrun, so I quickly called up Major Collins for some support.

"Major, we could use a hand over here!" I said over the COM, all while rattling off another burst from my DMR at the enemies that crowded us.

What I received in response was less than encouraging. "Can do, Colonel! But be advised, we just ran into a group of Phantoms hiding out by the ruins! If we leave this station, the Eighth Engineers aren't going to have any coverage on the ground or in the air! They'll be wide open to attack! Your call, ma'am."

"Fuck," I muttered. We really needed the help on this side - if I didn't send Collins in, Earth was in danger from the new threat we faced now with the Prometheans. But if I did, Harris's battalion - the men and women I used to lead myself just a few months ago - would almost surely receive a catastrophic amount of casualties trying to contain the enemy on their own. I'd already pulled their support from the 904th and given them the air wing in exchange, so if I pulled any more...they'd be toast.

I made the tough choice then and there. The portal was the top priority, but I was sure Travis and his team wouldn't let me down. We'd just have to hold on until the air commander was freed up on her side to come lend us a hand.

"Okay, Collins. Go ahead and remain with Harris's unit. We'll figure something out until you've got the skies over there cleared. Just do it fast, Major."

"Yes, ma'am. We're on it."

Meanwhile, we still had two large groups of very pissed off and determined extraterrestrials to go after. With Porter gone, Sergeant Lynch had taken up his mantle in an abstract way and had even picked up his former squad leader's SAW in a more concrete one. With a bulletstorm of automatic fire downing Remnant troop after troop, and Crawler after Crawler, the rest of us were freed up to take on the big guys - the Knights and the irritatingly persistent Watchers.

One of the Knights teleported in behind us then and as I whipped

around quick to take down the sentinel over its shoulder, it turned to me with blazing eyes and a purple sword ready to skewer me. I backpedalled fast, trying to get out of the way...and found myself bumping right into the back of an Elite. Caught between a rock and a hard place, I thought for sure I'd just made Porter's sacrifice void when the Knight's blade shot out for my hide. Without a second thought I ducked, throwing myself flat on the ground and covering my head when I heard the sound of the blade sinking into the Elite's back and the alien giving a surprised groan. More dark blood fell onto my armor and fatigues, but before I could dwell on the dry-cleaning bill, I slipped out from underneath the duel and scrambled back, breathing hard as I realized how close I'd come - again - to being made a corpse.

I'd just gotten myself back on my feet and was searching for a new target - not that hard to find - when I saw the ammo counter on my gun had gone to zero. I reloaded again and then set back to the task at hand.

I kept up the fire alongside my Marines, fighting harder and feeling more invigorated since I'd lost a great aide and friend today. But I felt worried, too, knowing that without any air support, there was a very real possibility that both the Storm and Prometheans might break through. They were fighting hard, and taking them on both at the same time - even if they were also going after one another - was almost beyond our ability to handle.

Then I got a message on the COM.

My brother's line was filled with static when he hailed me, but I still made out his words.

"Hey, Natalie? We've run into a problem."

"Again? What now?"

His voice changed, and that's how I knew it was bad. A seed of fear sprung up inside me, and I thought again of my nightmare - the one where my brother had appeared on the Highway, looking down at me next to Lewis and Hayden.

"Nat, I don't know how to say this. But if we want this portal gone, we need to do it manually. We tested the remote det and it's not going to work."

The seed of fear burst into full-blown anxiety then and I found myself holding a hand to my helmet, as if that was all it took to keep me together. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said, sis. We can't take the portal out from a safe distance. If it...goes, we go with it."

"Trav..."

My voice faltered and I stopped there. This couldn't be happening again. I thought of the two good Marines I'd sent to their deaths in Ecuador five years ago, when we needed that Flood ship gone to stop the parasite from spreading...except this time it was on a much, much bigger scale. There was a whole platoon of Marines involved this time - not just Travis's demo team, but the two squads of Marines I'd sent



in with them after we left to protect them in case we couldn't hold the lines and some of the ex-Covies slipped through. None of them would make it out in time.

And this time, it was my little brother who was among them.

"I'm sorry, sis. You have to make a choice," my brother said steadily.

"I can't," I breathed.

His tone went hard. "Listen. If you don't order the det, all this shit will go to Earth. Another war, Natalie. My girlfriend, my son, your kids are going to be the recipients. And billions of other people, too. Please, don't do that for me. Let us take the hit instead."

Shit. He was right. I couldn't prioritize my brother's life over everyone else's, or the lives of the Marines with him. It was forty men and women I gave death sentences to today to save several billion later.

But their deaths would always be on my hands. Always.

"Do it," I said in a rush, before I could stop myself. "Blow the charges, Trav. Whatever it takes."

There was a moment of silence on the other end, then a resolved, "Okay."

"Travis - "

"I know. Be good to Kelsey and Adam for me, all right? Tell them I love them, and that I'm doing this for them."

The connection cut then and I was at a loss - with what to say or do. I realized that there was nothing I could say or do to stop the flowing tide of events that would end in my brother's death, and the death of thirty-nine other brave Marines. It was what needed to be done - there was no question about that, and any other choice would have been reckless at best, callous and treasonous at worst. We were getting our asses handed to us and I just couldn't risk an entire planet to wait on the air wing.

But the right choice I was left with, the one I was making, still didn't sit well with me. It sent sharp spikes of pain right through my heart, and I didn't even breathe again until I heard the huge series of detonations go off behind us.

With those sounds, I knew that Earth's salvation was complete.

And that Travis and each and every one of the other Marines I'd sent down there with him were gone.

#### 44. Chapter 43: Crossroads

Author's Note: So. I've reposted an updated version of Ch. 42 that's mostly as you remembered it (if you had a chance to read it), but with a reworked ending. I'd go take a look at that first before

reading this chapter since it has changed.

Also, I feel reasonably sure that I've been able to straighten out the story now since it went a little awry last chapter, so I decided to go ahead and post this up even though the fic itself isn't totally done yet. Still got another chapter or two to get through, but now that things are back on track how I'd like them to be, here goes.

Hope you enjoy!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Forty-Three: Crossroads<span>\*\*

As I stood there numbly looking out at the three factions still fighting each other - only momentarily distracted by the large detonation behind us on the beach - I suddenly remembered an old scene from childhood. I'd been fifteen at the time, and we were at our home on Mars: me, my mom, my brother Travis, and my little sister Allie. It was summertime between my sophomore and junior year of high school, and I was bummed because my older brother Mark, nineteen then, and my older sister Jenna, twenty-one, were both gone from home. Mark had left to go back to college to take summer courses so he could graduate early and jump in on the War; Jenna was already a Marine and had been gone for about a year on deployment.

That meant that what I was left with for companionship were my friends, and when I was around the house - which was most of the time - my two younger siblings. I'd always gotten along more with Mark and Jenna, especially since as a young teen they'd been the ones to show me the ropes of navigating some of the changes and challenges I'd face in the coming years - Jenna for all the girl stuff, Mark for warning me about the ulterior motive of older boys and to offer his help as a bodyguard/face-puncher in case of need. But this summer I was left with Travis and Allie, and, being the middle child, I realized I probably still had a lot in common with them, too. I was neither among the oldest nor the youngest of the Cooper clan, so I tried my best to adapt to both.

The first few days went badly. My little sister Allie was only eleven and hardly interested in the same things I was at the time, while Travis was a twelve-year-old boy. They might as well have been aliens to me at that point. I was at the age where I was mostly wrapped up in myself and my own dramas, real or imagined, and scoffed at the thought of having to spend another minute with my annoying little siblings, who still acted like the children they were. I wished Mark or even Jenna would come back to whisk me away on their grown-up adventures and assure me it was all a bad dream.

What happened instead was one morning, our mother left early for work and crept into my bedroom. I felt her shake me awake and say, "Natalie, something's come up. I won't be home tonight. Take care of Travis and Allison while I'm gone. I've left some money on the counter for you to order food if what's in the fridge is too hard for you to make. And be sure all three of you take a shower and get to bed on time tonight. No staying up late. And nothing riotous while I'm away, okay? I mean it."

I didn't know why she thought I wouldn't disobey her; I'd never been

much of a crazy kid up to that point, but I was a teenager now and defying authority was in. I could've easily blown the whole thing off and let my siblings eat what they wanted, do what they wanted, and stay up as late as they wanted while our mom was gone. But in the past, it'd always been the older kids who'd been given the responsibility of handling us. That day, because Mark and Jenna were gone, it was me. That was huge to me, having always been the middle kid who fit in everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This time, I was given the important task to do. For once, I was the oldest kid in the house, and so the weight of what she said to me stuck.

That day I did everything I could to make sure I was the best substitute parent my younger siblings could have. I took care of them and spent time with them without resenting it because I knew I was doing something good, something worthy. I was watching out for them, not just being a mismatched playmate. I made sure they had fun, food, got clean, and got to bed, just as I'd been told.

By the time they went to sleep that night, I was exhausted, but I felt good about the day. After making sure Allison was in her room with the lights out, I moved on to Travis's and flipped the switch.

"Natalie?" he said to me in the dark as I turned to go.

"Yeah, little bro?"

"Thanks, sis. For everything you did today. I had a good time."

I smiled a little. "I did, too."

"I love you. You're my favorite sister."

I heard the change in his breathing then as he drifted off to sleep. In the meantime, I stood there in the doorway a moment longer, grinning wide to myself and thinking now that it wasn't actually so bad that everyone else was out of the house.

\* \* \*

><p>Back in the present, I knew now that my little brother Travis was gone forever. It was a hard reality to live with - not something I was even sure I could stomach after having lost so much already. But I also knew that I didn't have the luxury of dropping to my knees and crying, like I wanted to. I wanted the rest of the world to disappear, to leave me alone in my grief, but life didn't work that way. Even with yet another huge loss I'd just sustained, I still had my job to do - and no one else to do it for me if I faltered. For better or for worse, the duty was mine, just like the responsibility for the decisions I made.<p>

When I opened the COM channel to the regiment, my voice was rough. That much I couldn't seem to help. "Marines, that was an entire platoon of your fellows who just went up to protect Earth. Let's make sure their sacrifice wasn't in vain. Keep at it and let's hold the line until our air support can reach us. Cooper out."

The immediate area was already soaked in blood, alien and human, and dozens of bodies lay all over the tan dirt - Marines, ex-Covenant,

and torn up pieces of metal from the Prometheans. It looked like something between a slaughterhouse and a junkyard, a scene as morbid as what I felt inside. But we pushed on, fighting back since we had no other choice if we wanted to make it out alive and remove the threat to Khan.

"Move it, Marines! Get after 'em!"

Meanwhile I practiced what I preached, firing off bursts from my DMR at the Prometheans and Storm surrounding us. Beside me, Sergeant Lynch did a decent job at impersonating the late Porter, keeping himself close in case of need, and providing good suppressive fire with the SAW. As both factions of the enemy kept advancing, however, we were forced to move back in turn. Soon, I knew there'd be nowhere else for us to retreat to. We needed something more to stem the tide, or we'd be cooked.

I rolled quickly to the side then as a hail of needler rounds flew my way, thankfully colliding and exploding against the dirt-sand of the ridge rather than against my armor plates - or worse, tearing into my skin. The area was so congested now with troops on all sides that I nearly rolled right into the way of an oncoming Crawler, missing it by just a few feet. From the position on my back, I quickly dropped my DMR onto my torso armor and pulled out my sidearm, as fast as I possibly could, and shot the doggie robot point-blank with the whole clip. All eight rounds from the M6H hit on target, making the sentient AI-bot spark at each point of entry till the thing was destroyed. I laid there a split-second longer, taking in a couple of rapid breaths before I reasserted to myself that I was fine and alive, and got back to my feet.

Lynch was on my flank again in seconds, looking worried. "Ma'am? You all right?"

"Yeah, Sergeant," I replied, breathing hard. "No problems. You?"

"Good to go, ma'am. It'd be nice if there were less of these bastards to go through, though."

"Roger that. Just keep on it."

"Understood, Colonel."

If ever we could have used help from our flyboys up above, it was now. By some miracle - maybe the cosmos finally throwing us a bone - Major Collins was the one who hailed me next.

"Colonel, we've got 'em! Phantoms are down and the skies are clear. You still need that support?"

"Do we ever!" I shouted in response. "Pull a squadron from Harris's sector and send them out, now, Major! I'm tagging all friendly locations for your bombing run. Blow anything that's outside those bounds to hell!"

"Acknowledged, Colonel! We're on our way!"

The response time wasn't instantaneous, but we didn't have to wait much longer, either. In under two minutes, the air wing commander was

radioing me again - this time with some of the most encouraging words I'd heard in hours.

"Colonel, this is Flight Leader. Coming in hot in five! I repeat, coming in hot in five! Keep your heads down!"

I nodded to myself and quickly relayed the info. "Marines of the 213th and 904th, we've got our wings coming in shortly to help us out! Watch it!"

It seemed like it was a lot less than five minutes when the sound of a squadron of Broadwords swooped in. It was a sound that had been my saving grace more than once in my career, and I wholeheartedly welcomed it.

The massive detonations that dotted the nearby lines then were truly a spectacle to witness. One minute there were tons of ex-Covies and Prometheans duking it out to get the "privilege" of killing us all, the next there was nothing but black craters and smoke, alien parts and sparking hunks of metal left in the wake. Contrary to what Warfield had predicted, removing the 904th Infantry from the middle had opened up a whole enemy killing field that our air support could use to its advantage, without fear of hitting our own. And the plan worked wonderfully.

"\_Woo!\_" a Marine beside me whooped. "Take that you fuckers! That's what I'm talking about!"

In the moment and despite the quake of the ground beneath my boots, I found myself smiling a little, too. The pain of Porter's death seemed vindicated now, and though it wasn't dampened in the least, I felt like he'd truly given up his life for us. Not just for me, but for all his brothers- and sisters-in-arms. For this moment.

And while my younger brother's death was still raw in the extreme, I could feel the weight of his sacrifice, too - and that of the rest of his team.

When the Broadwords finally veered off from their flight path, bombing run complete, I immediately opened up a channel and said, "Nice work, air wings! 52nd Regiment, now the rest is up to us! Harris, push your battalion forward and let's condense this fight! Take them on from both sides! Brewer and Mullen, keep up the pressure and let's finish them off!"

With the combined forces of my three battalions, the air wing, the two support companies of rebels, and the Mantis and tankers and 'Hogs, I knew now that we had this in the bag. It was an entirely different scenario than the one we'd been facing even ten minutes ago, but oftentimes the tide of battle moved just that fast. We'd lost so much, given up so many lives to get here, but now, finally, things were going our way. The second Battle for Qamar was coming to a close - and soon, with the portals gone, there'd be no chance for a third.

A good outcome for such a shitty day - and a more than harrowing deployment.

But although for the great majority of my Marines, the people of Earth, and the people of Khan, we seemed to have done well, I knew it

would take me a long time to escape the weight and pain of my decisions in the field today. Decisions that had cost the lives of not only three dozen of my men, but also my little brother. It was something I'd never forget...and to be honest, even though I knew I'd done the right thing, I didn't know if it was a choice I could live with.

\* \* \*

><p>Things calmed down a lot quicker than I would have thought, and just an hour later the 52nd Regiment and I were in mop-up mode. I walked around the battlefield with my security detail in tow, stopping occasionally to finish off the badly wounded Storm troop or Promethean robot here and there, but mostly just taking it all in.<p>

The size and scale of this fight was like nothing I'd ever dealt with before - at least not in my position as supreme ground commander. The battle in Africa at the end of the War had been even larger, but I hadn't been the one at the helm then. This was different, in so many ways. All of this was because of me - a reflection of my choices. And now, I'd have to learn to cope with it.

When we were reasonably sure there was no danger of being shot at by anything anymore, I pulled off my helmet to get the unadulterated experience. I wanted to remember this moment, to fix it in my mind. I wanted to bear its full weight, so I knew how to temper my decisions in the future - and be cognizant how many lives it might cost if I didn't do something right.

I was startled out of my thoughts then as I looked at the remains of the carnage all around me by a familiar voice.

"Colonel?"

I turned around to see Lieutenant Caleb Lloyd standing there, surveying the area himself. I remained silent and folded my arms across my chest, waiting for him to go on.

"I just wanted to give you my condolences for the loss of your brother, ma'am. I'm so sorry."

I nodded at first, but had to swallow down hard on my emotions before I could reply. "Thank you, Cal. It's harder knowing I gave the order myself."

"There was no other choice, ma'am."

At that I snorted. "But I still feel like I killed him. No different than if I'd pulled the trigger."

"That's not true," he said firmly. "You saved Earth - and this planet."

"Yeah. I'll be sure to tell that to the forty families who have to live with that. And the tens of others who've now lost their loved ones to the fighting here." I slowly shook my head as I walked away. "As someone who counts myself among them, I'll tell you now that it's still a jagged fucking pill to swallow."

\* \* \*

><p>A short while later I was able to meet up with Matt as well. It was good knowing that at least he and the spook had gotten through the combat unharmed - Willis would be happy about his brother, and I was glad I didn't lose yet another good friend. Khan had taken so much from me in such a short span of time that I just couldn't handle one more tragedy. I wanted off this planet now, for good, and I wanted to go home and be away from all this for as long as I could.<p>

I also received a message from Captain Rhodes while I helped get the battalions and armor organized for the return to our staging camp once we were all done. He and the rebs' stealth ship had done it. The Storm ship was finally gone from orbit.

"We're a little beat up - Laraza's boat more than us - but we accomplished the mission, as did you. You know what that means now, Colonel."

"We're going home?"

"We're going home," he confirmed. "Pack your bags and make sure you get everything groundside squared away. It'll take us a few days to get everything all wrapped up, but after that, it's full sails back to Earth. You did a wonderful job, Cooper. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, trying to bury the emotion in my voice. "It means a lot. And I uh...I wanted to tell you my brother Travis died today. In the fighting, when we had to blow the Earth portal."

"Shit. I'm very sorry to hear that."

"Thirty-nine other Marines were killed as well, sir. It was my call."

I heard the Navy captain release a heavy sigh. "It's the burden that comes with command, Colonel. I know you've had to make choices like this before, but the higher up the chain you go, the higher the number of dead when you have to decide."

"I know, sir. I just...it doesn't make it feel like that much of a victory."

"Well, it is one. Plain and simple. Not only that, but you did something extraordinary out there today, Cooper. You saved not one planet, but two. That's not anything that should be made light of, or ignored."

I gave a humorless chuckle. It was the best I could muster in the moment. "I'll let you know when I start to believe that, sir."

\* \* \*

><p>The pack-up process hadn't been underway long when I started to feel a nagging need to go down to the beach to see the wreckage. All at once, the realization that I'd never get to see my brother again hit me with the force of ten tons of bricks, and I wanted to be able to at least say goodbye in some way before we left Qamar forever. As

the idea started to take root and grow in my mind, I radioed my XO for coverage.<p>

"Major Brewer, it's Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," I said.

"Ma'am?" came the immediate response.

"I'm going to take a few minutes to head down to the beach. Think you can handle things topside while I'm gone?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've got it."

"Good, and thanks. Cooper out."

I turned to Porter's squad then - now Sergeant Lynch's - and said, "Gear up, Marines, and let's move. We're heading for where the tunnel used to be."

\* \* \*

><p>I knew as we walked that they probably thought I was crazy. And given all that I'd had to endure, in the past and present, frankly, I was surprised I wasn't. But this was my last chance to visit the place where Travis had died, and I was going to take it.<p>

It was hard to contain my emotions when we finally got down to the beach. I wiped at my clouding eyes more than once with the collar of my T-shirt, since the rest of my uniform was even dirtier with blood, sweat, and dirt, but I didn't let the tears fall. Not in front of my Marines - and not when they, too, had lost someone close to them today. Yet I trudged on, hoping that this would give me some form of closure, and maybe a tiny smidgen of solace.

What I found instead was an enormous pile of blown-up, blackened rocks up ahead once we were getting close. It looked like half the cliff face had collapsed from the detonation inside, and now the rubble fanned out across the whole strip of sand in front of it, stopping at the lapping waves. It was a terrible amount of destruction for a terrible loss of life, but also a place where the actions of a relative few had brought salvation to countless others.

And though my brother had done a very courageous thing, I felt like the scene had punched me in the gut.

I wanted to let loose then and sob. I didn't care who was watching. Travis was gone, and he'd ceased to be right here, in this space. I had a right to grieve, even if I'd been the cause of it. But the tears wouldn't come.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Sergeant Lynch said beside me. "There's nothing left."

"Not even bodies to recover," I murmured.

"No, ma'am. We should head back up top."

"Wait."

Past the roaring of the ocean nearby, I thought I could hear



something. A faint sound that was out of place here. I'd dismissed it at first as my imagination, but it persisted, willing me forward to go investigate. I took several steps in its direction, then turned back to the sergeant with a frown.

"Lynch, you hear that?"

"Nothing, Colonel. Why? What is it?"

"I'm not sure. Keep your guns up."

I raised my DMR myself, wondering what the hell was going on. A million thoughts went through my head in a second: maybe the explosion hadn't completely destroyed the portal. Maybe a few of the ex-Covies had infiltrated our lines during the fight and made it down here. Maybe the Prometheans had teleported in from the other side

-

And then I heard the noise again, closer this time. More distinctive.

It was coughing.

"Holy shit!" I cried.

I slung my rifle over my back and ran towards the sound then, hoping against hope that someone - anyone - had survived the impossible. I climbed over the rocks, slipping more than once but never completely losing my footing on the loose debris, and started to dig. I pulled the smaller rocks off myself, then had the rest of my security detail come in to help with some of the bigger ones. Thanks to the detonation, none were too big for several Marines to move. In short order we had an opening, and I looked down inside to see a bloody and battered Marine, close to unconscious, coughing and groaning against the sand.

\_Travis.\_

"Travis!" I yelled out to him. "Oh my God, Trav...can you hear me?"

The figure down below lifted his head just a bit towards the sound of my voice and then lolled back. I took that as a nod and could hardly believe my good fortune. He looked badly injured, though, so I didn't thank my lucky stars just yet.

"Hang on, Travis!" I shouted instead. "I'll get help! We'll get you out of there!"

Turning back to my Marines, I ordered, "Clear the rubble, now! We've got a live one!"

It took several minutes of painstaking work, but soon, we had an opening large enough to pull him carefully through. With Lynch's help, I grabbed my little brother and pulled him out of the hole in the wreckage, and over onto the soft sand by the shore. There I could see he had a number of bad cuts and scrapes, along with a few bones that looked out of place. But he was alive, and breathing, and at least semi-conscious if not alert.

I placed my hand on his cheek as I crouched over him in the sand and grinned, all of the heavy pain of grief lifting in one single moment. "You made it, little brother. You made it. We'll go get Doc for you and you'll be just fine. I know it."

#### 45. Chapter 44: Onto a New Path

##### \*\*Chapter Forty-Four: Onto a New Path\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*1303 Hours, March 24, 2558. City of Redwood Falls, Planet Khan. "The Return," Outer Colonies. Day Thirty-Four of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*\*\*\*

After finding Travis alive down on the beach, Major Harris's battalion and I spent several more days on Qamar looking for any others that may have survived the explosion, while the remainder of the regiment returned to the camp. After six days of searching, however, and no indication that there was anyone else left alive, it was time for us to call it quits. It seemed my brother was the lone survivor of that one, a circumstance I was sure he was both thankful for and saddened about at the same time.

I'd been the one with the unpleasant task of informing him while he continued his recovery in the field hospital on the mainland once we got back. Needless to say, he hadn't taken it well.

"Fuck, Natalie," he said to me through blurred vision. "That was my team. My whole fucking team...and the others..." He shut his eyes hard and put a hand to his face. "Why me? Out of all those people, why did I make it out and not them?"

As I sat beside him on one of the small plastic bedside chairs I was very familiar with by now, I took his hand and squeezed. "I don't know, Trav. I had it happen to me once, too. Six years ago on Heath, in the battle where I got my back barbecued...I found out I was the only one who made it out alive from my entire platoon. Over thirty Marines wiped out, just like that - everyone I knew. I asked myself the same questions then, and I never found any answers. It was painful and tough, and it took me a long time to come to terms with that." I squeezed his hand again in reassurance. "But somehow, you'll get through. In the meantime, if you need someone to talk to, I'm here."

Travis nodded then, but I could tell he wasn't ready to cross that bridge just yet. After a week in the hospital, his wounds - four broken ribs, a broken arm, and fractured left patella - were healing up just fine, but I knew the real hurt was mental. And those scars were a lot tougher to mend.

That was two days ago. Since then, my little brother had been transferred to the medical wing on the Excalibur - along with most of the regiment and our supplies. The only ones of us still left planetside were me, Willis, Matt, and Heat, since we'd be needing a ride up to the boat soon and my husband couldn't fly. The two men kept their distance at all times, though, with Captain Heat mostly waiting around by his Pelican while Willis and Matt helped me finish up some last minute tasks before we left.

"I think that's the last of it," I said, zipping up my duffel bag

from the command quarters in the staging camp - now nothing but an expanse of empty buildings. I threw the bag behind my shoulder and started walking off in the direction of the Pelican with Willis. "You got everything?"

"Yeah," my husband replied. "I packed up earlier this morning. I'm ready to get out of here."

"Me, too," I said.

As we walked along, however, I thought again of everything I'd be leaving behind here. I'd lost my aide just a week ago to the fighting, a young man who was a great Marine, a loyal ally, and a good person. I'd lost thirty-nine other Marines whose deaths I'd ordered directly, something I'd have to cope with and live with for the rest of my life. Then there were the tens of other men and women under my command who'd give their lives fighting on this planet, both in the earlier battles on the mainland, and later out on the island.

I'd also lost my best friend here on Khan, just over two months ago. I'd never see Oliver Hayden again. The thought hit me hard and my eyes welled up for a moment, and I suddenly felt ten times worse for Oliver's wife. She'd had to come here, excited to see her husband, only to learn that he'd been torn from her just weeks before they could reunite. If I was his friend and feeling like this, I could only imagine what she continued to go through at his loss. I guess on the trip back to Earth Courtney would have plenty to think about - and plenty of time to look for the words she'd have to say to their sons when she got home.

It was almost a task I'd had to do for my own kids, but so much had happened since Willis's crash that I just couldn't dwell on that, too. I had to draw the line somewhere or I'd be consumed with sadness. And I couldn't be - not when Earth was safe thanks to our actions, and not when I still had my husband and my brother with me, both hurt but alive and healing fast.

We were getting closer to the bird now, and I suddenly dropped my duffel in the red dirt and stopped. Willis came to a halt, too, and threw me a questioning look.

"Coop? You okay?"

"Yeah," I said softly. "Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Everything we lost here. Everything I won't be connected to anymore now that we're going home."

My husband released a sigh. "You're not happy we're leaving?"

"Yes and no. I don't really want to be here anymore, but in some ways, it feels...wrong to leave."

"How?"

"I lost my friend here, Will. And my aide, and a lot of other Marines. Their lives were my responsibility. I carry that."

"You also nearly died a couple months ago," he reminded me. "And so did I. I'd like to get as far away from that particular collection of memories as I can."

I shook my head. "That's not the point. With Laraza still here and in charge...I feel like we're leaving the job unfinished here for the civvies, too."

Clearly exasperated with me but trying to remain patient, my husband took a step closer and put his hands on both my shoulders as he looked me in the eyes. "Natalie, you did everything, and I mean everything, you could for these people. You even just saved them - from the ex-Covies and the Prometheans. They've shown time and time again that they want no part in that. Hell, they tried to fucking kill you. More than once. When we leave here, don't even give it a second thought."

He softened his words by pulling me into his arms then, and for a moment I closed my eyes and leaned into him, imagining that there was nothing else in the world. But I knew there was - so much more. I had the lives of fifteen hundred Marines on my shoulders, fifteen hundred men and women that I had to oversee and ensure remained alive for our next campaign. It was more than I'd had to bear before, and it made it difficult to ever think that I could be carefree - even for a moment - again.

Willis didn't know that, though, or seem to understand. I wondered if there was any way I could help him see.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"There's something else."

He pulled back a bit and looked at me. "What?"

I jerked my head a little in the direction of the Pelican. "As someone who's seen their best friend get killed - twice - I wanted to say something. I know it's not really my business, and he's your friend, but I think you should give Heat another chance. He's always been there for you, honey - and us. What he did was awful, but it was an honest mistake and you're okay now. Life's too short, you know?"

Willis let go of me in an instant and took a step back. "I'm okay now? I still can't fly, Natalie! And it's his damn fault! He took that from me! So no, I'm not ready to forgive him for that yet. And I don't know if I ever will be."

Surprised by his outburst, I just stood there a second and folded my arms across my chest, smiling sadly. "With all the lives we lost in this place, you think you'd have more respect for the fact that our time on this earth is finite. We see it every fucking day, Willis. By the time you decide you're good with all this, it might be too late. Don't get too comfortable in the fact that you'll always have Heat or me or anyone else around forever for you to make amends with. Because in the blink of an eye someone you love, someone you care about, could be gone - just like that. If I didn't know that before, I sure

as hell relearned it here again in a big way."

I left my bag there for him to take to his buddy then and just walked off. I still had one more thing to get done before we left, and it didn't involve my husband - and I sure as hell didn't want to bring his attitude along with me.

\* \* \*

><p>As always, Matthew was the one to accompany me into the city, while Willis and Heat presumably waited by the Pelican. The younger Hawk walked beside me without a hint of anxiety this time, probably damped by his lengthy first experiences with combat now. I wanted to tell him not to get too confident, that it wasn't too late for the rebs to screw us over, but I didn't want to take his calm away from him. We'd been on edge enough the past few weeks - better that I take over that duty for both of us.<p>

"I still don't get why you have to meet up with this guy - again," Matt said to me as we crossed the streets. "For all you know, he could just be waiting to finish you off now that's it's all over."

"True," I conceded. "But you have to remember that for a shitty mayor, he actually did us a lot of good. Without his extra troops, and especially without the ship, we'd be having a very different conversation right now." Or none at all, I added to myself.

"Well, yeah...but he also shot at you. Twice."

"Three times if you count the two bullets that went through me the first time," I corrected.

"Right. So you couldn't just send him a postcard or something? 'Thanks for the help, no thanks for all the lead'?"

I chuckled. "It's customary, kid. I'm in charge of groundside operations, so now that we're pulling out, I've got to go through all the motions with him and let him know it's done. Settled."

My brother-in-law just frowned. "Okay. I just hope it doesn't come back to bite you in the ass."

"Me, too, kiddo. Me, too."

Once again the designated meeting place was the town mayor/rebel leader's club, empty right now because of the time of day. Leaving Matthew outside, as always, I stepped in with nothing but my pistol strapped to my hip for protection, and I immediately jumped when I heard a gunshot ring out. I watched as the bullet pinged off the linoleum floor near my boots while my heart raced.

Then I heard the sound of Javier Laraza's rich laughter.

"Ah, Colonel. You should have seen the look on your face! You thought I was done trying to kill you, didn't you?"

Putting a hand subtly to my holster, I let out a snort. "Hardly. I haven't survived this long as a Marine by letting my guard down."

"Very wise."

I finally saw him step out of the shadows then, and the small smirk remained on his face. "But also entirely unnecessary."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You and your Marines are departing!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "That means I no longer have reason to kill you. I have gotten what I wanted, and so have you. We are not enemies anymore, my friend."

"I'm sorry to burst your bubble, Mr. Laraza, but you and I are not 'friends'. I flatlined for five minutes and had a heart attack the first time you tried to go after me. I don't call that being friendly." I took in a deep breath and sighed. "But, what I am here to do is to thank you. Without your help, and that of your ship and your men, we couldn't have gotten rid of the Prometheans and Storm on our own. So thanks."

Laraza set his weapon down on the bar counter now and stepped a little closer. "So this is the end, yes?"

"Yes, exactly how you wanted it. My superiors have agreed not to send anymore troops here once we're gone."

His smile broadened. "That is good. Very good, Cooper."

As I kept my eyes on him and with my hand still hovering over my holster, I watched as he went over behind the bar and stooped to pick something up. When he came back over, I saw that it was a sealed bottle of brandy - the same kind I'd had in his soundproof room the night I'd gotten drunk.

"Here. For your troubles. I'd like you to have this to remember Khan by."

\_As if I could forget,\_ I thought, but I accepted the gift with a nod. I figured since the man had nearly killed me once and went and shot at me yet again, the least he could do was present me with a bottle of booze as apology.

I turned to go then, but just before I stepped out the door, I turned back. I looked at the mayor and said, "Take good care of your people, Laraza. We stepped in to help this time, but the destruction of the portals doesn't guarantee the Storm might not wander back into the neighborhood again or find something else of interest here. Stay safe. I have a feeling another war might be brewing soon."

## 46. Chapter 45: Renewal

Author's Note: Last chapter of the story! I hope you've enjoyed, and please let me know what you think. And don't forget to go on to the Closing Author's Note once you're finished, too. :)

Thanks so much for reading!

\* \* \*

><p><strong><span>Chapter Forty-Five: Renewal<span>\*\*

\*\*Undetermined Shipboard Time, March 24, 2558. \*\*Onboard UNSC Transport Ship \_Excalibur\_, In Orbit Above Planet Khan\*\*. "The End of the Road," Outer Colonies. Day Thirty-Four of the Dawn of the Prometheans\*\*

A few hours later the four of us boarded the \_Ex\_. Landing inside the port hangar bay, I took my time collecting my gear and bottle of brandy while Willis and his brother filed out. My husband didn't even wait to see if I was coming behind him - they just walked off in the direction of the nearest hatch into the corridor, making me frown. I wondered if the rift I'd first felt before returning to Qamar was beginning to broaden more than I thought.

"Don't mind him, Cooper," Heat said to me as he stepped out of the cockpit and pulled off his helmet. "Your husband can be a real jackass sometimes."

I snorted. "Tell me about it."

"I don't mean to pry, but...is something going on between you guys? Looked like you were being pretty frosty with each other on the ride back. It was almost too quiet for comfort. And I know that's very different than how you guys normally are."

"We were fighting about you a little earlier."

Captain Heat immediately grinned. "Did you finally tell him about your strong attraction to his very handsome wingmate?"

I rolled my eyes, then gave him a pointed look. "No, actually. And stop trying to dig yourself an even bigger hole. I think the giant black tar pit you're in right now in Willis's mind is deep enough."

"All right. No more jokes. Got it."

"I'm serious, Brandon. He's...about as pissed as I've ever seen him. You guys were like brothers before this, and you know it takes an atomic bomb of an issue to get on Willis's bad side. I was almost convinced he didn't even have one till our big fight about Matt a couple months ago. And now this."

Heat raised an eyebrow at me. "You guys had a fight about Matt?"

"Yeah. Long story. And not your business."

"Okay." He let out a sigh. "So what are we going to do about the guy?"

"\_We\_ are going to do nothing. I've said my peace to him, and that's as far as I'm getting involved. The rest is up to the two of you. I just hate to see you guys tiptoeing around each other all the time when everyone knows you're good friends. It'd almost be comical if it weren't so sad."

"And yet that's the state of things these days."

"Well, do something to change it," I said. "Will's not immune to a productive talk or a nice apology. Just keep trying till he's past his stubborn phase."

My husband's wingmate smiled a little again. "Is that what you do when you guys are fighting?"

This time I smirked. "\_I\_ have other weapons at my disposal." I raised my hand up before he could speak. "And no, I will not detail it for you."

"Right." Heat scratched at his head. "So what should I do? Last time I tried to talk to him he pretty much verbally kicked my ass. I'm sure he would've done it for real if he hadn't been lying in a hospital bed." He glanced down at the helmet in his hands. "And to be honest, I don't even really think I blame him. If he'd done the same to me by accident, and I'd spent weeks recovering and got told I'd never be able to fly again because of it...I don't know that I would've reacted any different."

"I know. You guys take your flying very seriously."

The captain shrugged. "It's a way of life, Natalie. It's like it chose us instead of the other way around."

That I could understand. In a way I'd always felt like that about being in the Corps. I couldn't imagine life outside of it, or the kind of person I'd be without it. I guess I could understand my husband's anger more when I looked at it that way, too.

"Well, just remember that if all else fails, time heals all wounds," I told Heat then. "He's not the type to stay mad at the people he cares about forever. That's the upside. The downside is, what we heard from the doctor so far isn't encouraging. It's not likely he's ever going to get his wings back, and I'm scared that that's...going to change him."

I'd started seeing the signs of that already. He was more bitter and quicker to get upset at things than he used to be. My hope was that that would change once we got home again and we had some distance from this place - but nothing was for sure. Either that, or some miracle happened and he was able to fly again someday.

Captain Heat gave me a solemn look then and reached out to squeeze my shoulder. "Don't worry about that just yet, Cooper. You're married to a good man. And underneath it all, he loves you very much. I know it."

"Thanks."

There wasn't really much else to say at that point, so we said our goodbyes for now and parted ways.

\* \* \*

><p>My next task was to set about making sure all the personnel under my charge were present and accounted for. For that I contacted my battalion commanders, speaking to Majors Harris and Mullen first, then lastly to my XO, Major Brewer. Once that was complete and I sent



a confirmation of the roster to Captain Rhodes, there was nothing else for me to do at this point but wait for the journey back to Earth to start. Releasing a sigh, I hefted my bag and bottle again and stepped through the hatches and corridors to the senior officers' berthing area.<p>

Willis and I were sharing new quarters this time, since the ship was laid out a little different than the Affair. The dumb AI who ran security still sounded about the same, though.

"Please state your name and rank for entry," the digitized voice prompted.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper, Natalie McKenzie. Service number 38221-50486-NC."

The light above the hatch lit green. "Access granted."

I walked inside then expecting to find an empty room, but my husband was already there. He had his back to me and his shirt and boots off as he lay sideways on the bunk, looking like he was just unwinding from the packing and the trip up. I was sure with his wounds still healing, the weight of the bags had probably made him sore.

"Sure took your time getting here," he said to me evenly when he heard me come in.

I immediately scoffed. "It might surprise you to know that as regiment commander, I have a lot to take care of before I get to relax and enjoy the ride. I had to make sure everyone and everything was aboard first."

I moved over to the small closet to dump my duffel, then took off my uniform jacket and pulled off my boots before sitting down on the chair beside the minuscule desk. Nope, I thought to myself. Haven't missed being on a ship at all. I was getting ready to open up the bottle of brandy Laraza had given me when I felt a pair of strong hands start to massage my shoulders.

Though I tried to hide it at first, I quickly had an appreciative smile spreading across my face as I closed my eyes. It felt like all the tension was dissipating and being replaced with...something else. "Will..."

"Nope," my husband countered, his voice close to my ear. "You don't get to protest this one. I know it's been a long day - half-day, really - and this is my way of trying to say I'm sorry."

Eyes still closed, I grinned a little wider. "This is a damn good apology so far."

I felt him lean down a bit more to press his lips against the side of my neck. "It'll get better," he whispered.

I had to admit, I liked the sound of that. More than anything right now, I needed some time where I could forget about it all - what had happened here on Khan, the battles we'd fought, the people we lost. I needed a mental break so I could keep it together and not let the memories overwhelm me - especially since lately, without the meds, I'd been reliving set pieces every night.

Suddenly Willis stopped though and I opened my eyes to find him turned around, facing me now. He had a serious look on his face, so I placed my hands on his cheeks and asked, "What is it?"

"I just want to let you know I've been thinking about what you said about Heat, when we were planetside," he answered. "And I promise to continue giving it its due consideration. I hope you understand why I can't let it go just yet, though."

"I know. Heat sort of...put it in perspective for me."

"He did?"

"Yeah. We talked for a bit after we landed and you and Matt took off at something close to a run." I raised an eyebrow at him. "Why the rush?"

Willis shrugged. "Just needed a few minutes to myself to digest things." He leaned in and kissed me, softly at first, then harder. "I think I've got my priorities straight now. I love you, Cooper."

I kissed him back, the smile quickly reappearing on my face again. "I love you, too."

Our embrace became more passionate then, and soon our breathing was labored. Surprising me yet again, Willis picked me up off the chair and carried me over to the bunk, landing over me. It was a testament to how much he'd healed in the last week, and hot as hell. I was reaching to pull off my T-shirt to match him when my datapad rang.

"Shit," I growled.

Willis planted his lips on mine again to stop my protest. "Let it go, honey."

I kissed him in return, then pushed up on his chest a little and ran a quick hand through my hair, now hopelessly messy. "I can't. It might be important."

My husband groaned in disappointment, but this couldn't really be ignored. I suppose in a way I'd accepted the likelihood of interruptions when I'd gotten promoted over a month ago now. I gently pushed past Willis as I got up off the bunk, then walked the couple steps over to the table, where my chirping datapad was.

"Lieutenant Colonel Cooper," I said, picking up.

"Colonel, it's Rhodes," came the reply. "I have something I'd like you to see in the briefing room. Go ahead and bring Major Hawk along as well."

"Uh, yes, sir. We'll be there in a minute."

Willis shot me a quizzical look from the bed as soon as I'd hung up. "What was that about?"

"It's Rhodes. He wants to see us in the briefing room. Better start getting presentable."

"Oh." His face fell. "So no - "

I picked up his shirt from the back of the chair and smacked him playfully with it. "Not now. Throw this on and your jacket and let's go."

\* \* \*

><p>I wasn't sure what to expect when we were called in. I didn't know if I was in trouble for something, if he needed to talk to Willis about his status, or whatever else might be up. All I knew was I hoped to hell it didn't have anything to do with any hostile aliens - or AI robots - suddenly reentering the equation.<p>

"Sir," I said when we walked in. "Lieutenant Colonel - "

Captain Rhodes waved a dismissive hand at me. "There's no need for formalities, Cooper. I just had a surprise for the two of you now that we're finally underway."

"Sir?"

A large screen popped up from the center of the table then, and I realized with growing delight what this was. Much like the end of the fighting I'd endured six years ago on Sigma Octanus IV, my husband and I were getting treated to a live link home post-op.

"I've momentarily restored access to personal communications on this console so you can call Mars," Rhodes said. "Feel free to contact your children from here. I know we've been away for several months already, and it'll be at least three weeks till we get back to the Sol System. I'm sure they miss you as much as you miss them."

"Wow, sir," Willis injected. "This is fantastic. Thank you."

"Yes, sir. Thanks," I added.

The Navy captain smiled. "You're welcome. I'll leave you to it."

As soon as he left, Willis and I exchanged a glance. Then my husband reached for the keys on the console while I sat down beside him, my heart beating hard with anticipation.

We hadn't seen or spoken to Gabe, Liam, and Olivia for almost five months. This was too good to be true.

The waiting was the hardest part. Once Willis finished entering the appropriate numbers, I reached for his hand from underneath the table. He took it and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Soon, the image of my father-in-law appeared on-screen. He seemed just as surprised to see us as we did him.

"Will? Natalie?"

"Hey, Dad," Willis replied. "We finally finished our big op. We're coming home."

His father smiled. "That's good news, son."

"How've the kids been, Mr. Hawk?" I asked.

"A little rowdy lately, but fairly obedient most of the time. I'm guessing you'd like to see them?"

"Yes, sir," my husband and I answered simultaneously.

"All right," he chuckled. "I'll get the little rascals now. Wait one."

The two of us waited impatiently for our kids to enter the screen. As soon as they did I felt a sudden wave of emotion engulf me. My babies were safe, alive, and healthy - and grown.

"Mommy!" Gabriel and the twins shouted in unison. "Daddy!"

"Hey, guys!" Willis responded. "How are you?"

"Good," Gabe answered for his younger siblings. "When are you and Mommy coming home?"

"Now, Gabe," I replied, finally finding my voice as I wiped at my eyes with my sleeve. "We're on our way, son. Just a few more weeks and we'll be back."

"I missed you, Mommy. And Dad. A lot."

"Me, too," Olivia said.

"Me three," Liam chimed in.

I gave a short laugh. "We've missed you, too."

We spent a couple more minutes talking with the kids, but despite how happy and excited I was to see them, I knew we had to keep an eye on the time. We'd been allowed access to the system for only fifteen minutes, so whatever we needed to say had to be fast. And I knew Willis probably wanted to talk to his parents, too.

"Okay, guys. Sorry, but we gotta go now," Willis said then. "Your mom and I will be home very soon though, all right? Be good for Grandma and Grandpa till then."

"Okay, Daddy."

"We love you," we both said.

"Love you too."

The three of them herded out of the room, and I was left with a crushing hurt I knew wouldn't subside until we were home with them. That wasn't the end of the conversation, however, as we still had five minutes of the call left.

"Dad?" Willis called out.

"Yes, son?"

He took a deep breath. "Dad...there's something else I want you to

know. Give me a sec and go get Mom for me in the meantime, please."

"All right."

Though obviously perplexed, Willis's dad did as he was told and also disappeared from the screen while my husband left the briefing room - presumably to go get Matthew from his quarters. This was one reunion I wasn't sure I needed to be present for, but since Willis hadn't asked me to leave to let them do it in private, I remained seated until he came back.

I turned around then. Behind me and currently out of the frame, my brother-in-law stood with a visibly anxious expression. I leaned out of the shot and gave him a small smile of encouragement.

"It'll be okay, Matt. Whatever's happened all these years doesn't matter to them. Remember that. You're their son. They love you."

He still looked at me like a deer caught in the headlights, but slowly he nodded and stared back at the screen. It felt like an agonizingly long wait until his parents reappeared - both of them this time - but really, it'd only been about a minute.

"Well, William?" his mother asked. "What did you want to tell us?" She looked at me in growing excitement. "Is Natalie pregnant?"

"No, no, no," I responded quickly, waving my hands. "We're not...looking to add to the family again just yet."

"Oh. Then what is it?"

I felt Willis tense up beside me. "Mom, Dad, we sort of...bumped into someone while we were here."

"Who?" his father asked.

"Well, I'll let my baby brother speak for himself."

My husband pushed Matthew into the frame then; the poor kid was still looking a little stunned.

At first all anyone did on either side of the call was stare mutely at one another. This was the first time in twelve years that they were seeing their dead son - and the first time Matt had seen them in just as long. After a while their mother simply broke into tears, long unbidden sobs, while their father continued to stare, his mouth agape.

"Matthew," he said finally, softly. "My son."

At that, my brother-in-law livened up, too. "Yeah. Hi, Dad. It's been a while."

"But how - ?"

"We'll explain everything when we get home, Dad," Willis said. "For now, just know that both your boys are coming home."

**\*\*THE END\*\***

## 47. Closing Author's Note

### **\*\*Closing Author's Note\*\***

Ever since I started in on this "new era" of the Cooper stories, I've been trying to think of a good place to end the series. I think with all the new realities, responsibilities, and realizations Cooper has made in this story (alliteration ftw), it's clear her tale isn't finished quite yet.

I've had ideas for a sixth fic swirling around in my head for a while now. I'd never write a story just for the sake of writing it unless I felt compelled by some strong ideas to push the plot forward - and since the ideas are there, and there's a slew of new canonical media coming out for the foreseeable future (in the form of Halo 5, new books and comics, etc), I know there's still more of the Halo universe to draw from. So as long as I've got the plotlines in my head and the source material continues expanding, I'd be happy to post another story on here if I have the readers' support. :)

On that note, **\*\*I'd like to thank everyone who read, reviewed, alerted, and favorited this story. You guys are amazing, and give me the drive to do what I do.\*\***

I really hope you enjoyed this installment of the Cooper series, and I hope to see you next time around!

End  
file.